

Looking-Glass Wars

Spies on British Screens since 1960

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Vernon Series in Cinema and Culture



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I would like to take the opportunity to thank the FWF for its generous funding of my research into British Spy Fiction.

Appropriately enough, the bulk of this study was written under the shadow of The Cedar Tree public house in Evington, Leicester, UK, the ancestral home of E. Phillips Oppenheim, the great writer of 'blood and thunder' spy thrillers of the first half of the twentieth century. There, I was able to enjoy many a convivial drink while contemplating the finer points of British spy fiction.

Introduction: Spy Fiction, History and Popular Literary Culture

The English fascination with spies is gloriously reflected in our literature, from Kim to A Question of Attribution, and while their Egyptian and Israeli counterparts remain untranslated, and the Americans unreadable, English spy novelists rule.

(Lewis Jones, *The Spectator*, 5 February 2011)

The spy is one of the most potent images of our age.

(Phillip Knightley, *Marxism Today*, November 1987: 41)

“The spy novel came into being in England and has largely remained a British preserve”. The judgement of the American historian and political commentator Walter Lacquer stands as a useful epithet and prompt for a study of British spy fiction (1983: 62). The modern spy story appeared early in the twentieth century in the same historical era that Britain established its first permanent security and intelligence agency. Widespread concerns regarding imperial defence, continental military rivalries, armaments races and foreign espionage acted as substantial spurs to writers seeking to warn against the country's lack of military preparedness. These often alarmist voices, which found popular acceptance with the reading public as well as some influential military figures, put pressure on the authorities to counter the supposed threat to national defence. The extent of the panic has been termed a ‘Spy Fever’, and as a direct consequence, there hastily emerged a framework for dealing with the alleged peril. A more robust Official Secrets Act was passed in 1911, which provided the police with greater powers against spies, and an official counter-intelligence section, the Secret Service Bureau, was established in 1909, and both were in place by the time of the outbreak of European war in August 1914 (French 1978; Andrew 1985: 34-85).

It was the professed success of British intelligence and propaganda during World War I which fed the myth of Britain's innate superiority in the art of clandestine activity and intrigue. It was a view that would survive well into the middle-century, until some humiliating exposures of Soviet penetration of the British political and scientific establishments and secret services began to

cast a shadow on the reputation of almost unnatural insight and infallibility previously enjoyed by the security and intelligence organisations in Britain.¹ The first significant and lasting spy stories also appeared in the period leading up to and during the First World War, establishing the singular reputation of British writers for this particular type of thriller fiction. And it is this close inter-relationship of espionage reality and fiction, of historical developments and literary practice, which underpins any proper appreciation of spying and intelligence in 20th century British culture.

The British have never been toppled from the top of the tree as far as spy literature goes. Typical is the view of the American political scientist Thomas J. Price, who comments: “*While the spy story is one of the most popular genres of fiction, it is in England that the grand masters of the genre exist. The likes of Ambler, Buchan, Fleming, Forsyth, Greene and le Carré are found nowhere else in such numbers*” (1994: 55). The American popular historian Wesley Britton agrees, stating that, “*Without question, the best spy literature was British, including the novels of Somerset Maugham, Frederick Forsyth, Graham Greene, Len Deighton, John le Carré and Ian Fleming*” (2004: 94). Revealingly, the two American literary critics John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg, in their influential study *The Spy Story*, provide a list of the 25 ‘greatest spy stories’. It is headed by Graham Greene’s *The Human Factor* (1978), British titles monopolise the first 11 places, and British writers claim a full 18 out of the 25 titles (1987: 231). The general assumption behind this ranking is maintained by the Canadian genre specialist David Skene Melvin, who has claimed, at the height of success for the spy novel, that, “*though the U.S. has produced many novels of espionage, it has not produced an outstanding one. The British have had a corner on the espionage thriller genre right from the beginning*” (1978: 15). It is a view further emphasised by the American cultural critic Michael Denning, who has claimed that, “*The spy thriller has been, for most of its history, a British genre, indeed a major cultural export*” (1987: 6).² American literary scholars Matthew Bruccoli and Judith Baughman are brief and to the point: “*The spy Novel is a British genre. If they didn’t invent it, they perfected it*” (2004: xi). Eminent American film critic Richard Schickel has adopted a similar attitude for the screen, claiming the spy picture to be the “*greatest of English movie genres*” (Review of *The Whistle Blower*, *Time Magazine*, 7 September 1987). In a different sense, Scandinavian scholar Lars Olé Sauerberg has claimed that spy stories were more popular in Britain than anywhere else in the world (1984: 5). It is evident from this that the spy story has served an important role in British culture.

The literary tradition

In short, espionage fiction intrigues us because it is a parable for our times, a morality play which raises questions about loyalty, honour and innocence.

(Phillip Knightley, *Marxism Today*, November 1987: 41)

It has been estimated that at least 300 British spy novels were published between 1901 and 1914, and that their appearance constituted a “*cultural phenomenon*” (Moran and Johnson 2010: 1). Accordingly, Nicholas Hiley can report that between 1908 and 1918 Britain was invaded by an army of fictional spies:

They landed in their thousands on bookstalls and in bookshops. They used the short story to establish themselves in hundreds of newspapers and magazines, successfully infiltrated dozens of popular stage plays, and were even spotted in cinemas and on the pages of children's comics.
(1990: 55)

The spy story emerged in this period out of the established literary traditions of imperial adventure, sensation writing, especially the novel of terrorism, the late 19th century trend for writing about invasion scares, and, it has been intriguingly suggested, with their secret amorality and locked rooms, Victorian pornography.³ Spy fiction absorbed many of the characteristics and archetypes of each of these forms and its development paralleled the popular genre of the detective story, with which espionage narratives considerably overlapped.⁴ The formative period of the spy story, emerging as it did within the historical context of the industrialisation of warfare and military expansion, relied heavily on the theft or copying of secret plans, documents and blueprints, and therefore placed it alongside the popular form of the crime story.⁵ From an early stage, distinctions emerged regarding the literary quality of the spy novel. Prolific and sensational authors like William Le Queux and E. Phillips Oppenheim bashed out stories which were incredibly popular, but usually failed to impress the critics. In contrast, some writers attracted critical notice and the espionage literature of Erskine Childers, John Buchan and W. Somerset Maugham from this early period established the reputation on which later British spy fiction rests.

A structural feature of the British spy story was its adoption and representation of dominant class and national attitudes of the time. As David Stafford points out, “*It quickly became established as a convention of the genre that there was a clear distinction between spies, who were foreign, and secret agents, who were British*”. As he continues, “*The fictional British agent, in direct contrast with his foreign opponent, was and remained, despite his activi-*

ties, quintessentially a gentleman" (1981: 491). The English gentleman, forged in a culture of 'Muscular Christianity', had the natural class attributes and breeding to equip him, without hesitancy or doubt, to confront the enemies of Empire abroad and to resist the subversive foreign ideas and influences that were beginning to circulate among the domestic working-classes. In this sense, the elite heroes of early spy fiction served as guardians of the social hierarchy, and in the stories:

Foreign danger and internal revolt thus coalesced in the conservative mind into a peril to the very fabric of society. The gentleman secret agent promised safety not just from foreigners but from basic threats to the social order.

(Stafford 1988: 46)

The figure of the 'gentleman adventurer' was recognisable from an earlier imperial fiction, and indeed the two forms overlapped in Kipling's classic *Kim* (1901), which dealt with the adventures of a boy spy on the frontiers of the far flung Empire. Importantly, this novel romanticised the concept of the 'Great Game', the imperial rivalry fought out between the British and Russian Empires in central Asia, and helped translate this idea into spy fiction wherein espionage and intrigue are formulated as a 'great game' enacted by gentlemen players.

While Le Queux, Oppenheim and their imitators gave us a long line of gentlemen spies and agents embroiled in adventures mixing romance, secret diplomacy and high life, of greater substance were the two gentlemen yachting enthusiasts of Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), the first true classic of espionage literature, and Richard Hannay, the archetype of the 'accidental agent', the colonial gentleman cast unexpectedly into danger and rising magnificently to the challenge, who first appeared in Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). The essentially amateur status of these heroes, unearthing German invasion plans in the former and thwarting an attempt by German agents to spirit secret naval plans out of the country in the latter, was a central component of the class and imperial myths rooted in the public-school ethos and the ideal of the English gentleman: an archetypal figure, 'trained for nothing, but ready for anything'; a man sure in his duty to King, Country and Empire. The activity of spying was generally believed to be something that a gentleman shouldn't do, and therefore writers had to construct a case for their heroes to act. The two gentlemen sailors of *The Riddle of the Sands* debate their right to serve England in any way necessary, and Julian Symons has revealed how the tricky moral dilemma was generally resolved: "They are viewed as spies pursuing evil ends, while We are agents countering their wicked designs with good ones of our own" (1972: 234, emphasis in the

original).⁶ The action of the English secret agent in these fictions is defensive; he is simply called upon to protect English prestige and sovereignty from the aggression and machinations of rival nations.

The archetype of the amateur-gentleman remained dominant in spy fiction for a generation, exemplified by Hannay in further adventures such as *Greenmantle* (1916) and *Mr Steadfast* (1919), writing which has been appreciated as bringing “*new qualities to the thriller, qualities which may be thought to have raised it to a new excellence*” (Howarth 1973: 142). The characterisation was more boorish and brutish in the guise of ‘Bulldog’ Drummond, a “*convincing combination of athlete and philistine*” as Patrick Howarth has described him (ibid: 153). Drummond appeared in a series of yarns penned by ‘Sapper’, a “*producer of blood and thunder*” in the words of Julian Symons (1972: 236), and similar figures populated the stories of novelists like Valentine Williams, Francis Beeding and Sydney Horler.⁷ Such patriotic gentlemen were the ideal type to stifle the ambitions of the sinister foreigner, whether ‘Swinish Hun’, various shades of ‘Oily Dago’, or ‘Fiendish Chink’, and a far from concealed xenophobia and anti-Semitism was stock in trade for many of the writers whose style remained popular into the 1930s.⁸ The novelist Colin Watson has admitted: “*There was something boyishly exuberant about these novels*” (1971: 113). It has been noted, though, that the emerging spy story marked a transition “*from the assertive, confident and expansionist themes of adventure fiction to the increasingly insular, even paranoid, espionage genre that stressed vigilance and protection from invasion*”; a tendency towards darker conspiratorial themes which would become more prominent among subsequent writers in the field (Woods 2008: 26).

An alternative if at the moment minor practice in espionage fiction emerged in the hands of the respected writers Joseph Conrad, G. K. Chesterton and W. Somerset Maugham. The two Conrad novels *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and the Chesterton story *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908), developed out of the tradition of the novel of terror which began to appear in consequence of anarchist and nihilist outrages across Europe in the late-19th century.⁹ Revolutionary violence, radical nationalism and subversive organisations dedicated to assassination were the subject of such novels as George Griffith’s *Angel of the Revolution. A Tale of the Coming Terror* (1893), Robert Cromie’s *The Crack of Doom* (1895), Edgar Wallace’s *The Four Just Men* (1905), and the American Jack London’s *The Assassination Bureau* (an unfinished novel of 1910).¹⁰ Such themes in the hands of Conrad and Chesterton became literary achievements and as such the novels have attracted critical enquiry and respect well beyond that devoted to the routine spy novel of the period, with the possible exception of John Buchan. The same is true of Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden; or*

the British Secret Agent (1928), a composite novel of short tales featuring the eponymous secret agent and his wartime service in Switzerland and Russia. The despairing moral tone of these stories and their treatment of espionage as often routine, dull and ineffective, were in stark contrast to the adventurous romanticism of the mainstream. “*After the easy, absurd assumptions made by Buchan, Sapper, and Oppenheim*”, Symons observes, “*the Ashenden stories have the reality of a cold bath*” (1972: 237). While offbeat if significant at their time of publication, these novels and stories would eventually have a profound influence on spy fiction in Britain. *The Secret Agent* and *The Man Who Was Thursday* would assume a renewed relevance and attract fresh critical inquiry in the 21st century amid the widespread concerns regarding global terror¹¹; and the *Ashenden* stories with their moral and cool realism would serve as a crucial influence on later writers like John le Carré who wished to jettison the romantic patriotism of the former tradition to explore themes of disillusionment and betrayal.¹²

A significant new departure in the writing of spy fiction appeared in the 1930s. Following in the wake of the Great Depression and the rise of totalitarianism there was a leftward political lurch in the spy novel in the hands of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, bringing a progressive realism and a new seriousness to the writing, which “*sought to transform the genre from the verbal banality and minimal characterizations of Le Queux and Oppenheim to a more morally ambiguous world of deception and danger*” (Woods 2008: 61). Ambler established himself as a genre specialist with such novels as *Epitaph of a Spy* (1938) and *Journey into Fear* (1940); while Greene developed as a more considerable literary figure and produced occasional ‘entertainments’ like *The Confidential Agent* (1939) and *Ministry of Fear* (1943) which ranked highly in terms of espionage literature and excellently served the author’s characteristic theme of moral ambivalence. The revisionism of Ambler involved a shift in the protagonist hero to that of an ordinary guy, perhaps an engineer or photographer, who gets caught up in skulduggery and intrigue, and away from what Ambler himself called the “*early cloak-and-dagger stereotypes – the black-velveted seductress, the British Secret Service numbskull hero, the omnipotent spymaster*” (quoted in Stafford 1988: 43; see also Snyder 2011). Rausch and Rausch refer to Ambler’s approach as the “*innocent victim school of espionage*”: essentially unheroic, “*the main characters are decent chaps who behave with intelligence while gripped by terror*” (1993: 99). The literary scholar Eric Homberger notes the “*change in paradigm*” with regard the spy thriller following the emergence of Ambler and Greene, in consequence of which the “*politics of Buchan and ‘Sapper’ have been turned on their head: the baddies now are right-wingers, enemies of democracy*” (1991: 88)¹³; and Woods writes of Ambler who took the “*spy story by its patrician neck, plucked the monocle from its eye, and pulled it down into the world of*

the common man, far away from the world of diplomatic aristocrats" (2008: 61). Both authors continued to write influential spy fiction into the 1970s and have been appreciated as heirs to the more 'naturalistic' approach pioneered by Somerset Maugham in the *Ashenden* stories, and in turn served as influences on that generation of espionage novelists which came to prominence in the 1960s, writers like le Carré and Len Deighton who explored a darker morality and further intensified the sense of 'realism' in the spy story.

More conventional spy fiction in the 1930s was penned by writers such as Bernard Newman (who also published under the name of Don Betteridge), a thriller writer who entered the espionage field in 1935 with *Spy*, and followed with *German Spy* (1936) and *Death under Gibraltar* (1938). Newman and his contemporaries barely had to shift ground following the outbreak of war in 1939, with that author contributing *Secret Weapon* and *Death to the Fifth Column* (both 1941) and *Second Front – First Spy* (1944). A thriller writer like Dennis Wheatley sent his established series character the gentleman adventurer Gregory Sallust on missions to continental Europe during the war in *Faked Passports* (1940) and *'V' for Vengeance* (1942); and new genre specialists emerged such as Helen MacInnes who concocted dangerous missions behind enemy lines in *Above Suspicion* (1941) and *Assignment in Brittany* (1942), and Manning Coles who did something comparable in *Drink to Yesterday* (1940) and *They Tell No Tales* (1942). Some writers established in other fields found the spy novel convenient for expressing their emergent social views in war-time, as was the case with J. B. Priestley and his *Black-Out in Gretley* (1942), or for re-examining the recent experience of the Second World War, as in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948).

Ambler and Greene remained important writers of espionage fiction in the 1950s, with novels such as *Judgement on Deltchev* (1951) and *Our Man in Havana* (1958). They were joined by new writers who had much material in the experience of the recent World War with its secret missions, double agents and resistance movements (Gilbert Hackforth-Jones, Hammond Innes, Alistair MacLean), and in the development of the Cold War which intensified the sense of ideological struggle and commitment in the realm of espionage (William Haggard, Maurice Edelman, Sarah Gainham). The decade belonged, though, to Ian Fleming and his creation of the secret agent James Bond, described by Maurice Richardson as the "*most compulsive character in popular fiction since the war*" (1964: 18). The series character first appeared in *Casino Royale* (1953) and then regularly until *The Man with the Golden Gun*, which was published posthumously in 1965.¹⁴ Fleming's secret agent stories, often criticised for their poor writing and their perverse violence and sexuality,¹⁵ were a potent mix of traditional elements of the adventure-romance blended with characteristics of post-war modernity; a fertilisation of John Buchan

with *Playboy*. Michael Denning has referred to their “*highly successful fusion of traditional themes of Empire and England with the images and spectacles of the consumer society*” (1987: 5-6), and Toby Miller has similarly appreciated the series as embodying the “*end of empire and the start of commercial globalization*” (2003: 129). Bond himself was something of a throwback to the ‘Bulldog’ Drummond type of un-reconstructed masculinity and class snobbery, an emphatically heroic stature bound to a nationalistic self-assurance, and was often pitted against the type of master criminal bent on world domination who would not have been out of place in a Sax Rohmer novel of two generations earlier.¹⁶ In these terms, the Bond stories were a return to what Colin Watson has labelled the “*thriller of unreason*”, wherein “*credible motives were entirely lacking*”, the style prevalent in the period around the First World War (1971: 116).

At the same time, “*Bond seemed to have been most cunningly and industriously synthesised to combine all the qualities essential for a new-style, up-to-the-minute, hyper-sexed, ready-made daydream secret-service hero*” (Richardson 1964: 18). With his hand-made cigarettes and taste for vintage wines, Bond was in the vanguard of a conspicuous consumption being made possible by an upsurge in affluence in the 1950s; and according to one analysis, the novels served as “*guidebooks to modern consumerism*” (Sandbrook 2006: 620, emphasis in original). Secret agent 007 enjoyed a liberated *Playboy*-style sexuality without commitment, which was largely fresh to the genre and would prove immensely influential¹⁷; while the series observed a fetishistic regard to advanced technology with its ingenious devices and gadgets put to the aid of the agent. The approach was also distinct in that 007 was a professional, he was an organisation man within the limits that the rugged individualism demanded by the role allowed. He was loyal to his chief M and to the wider Service, which at this stage hardly suffered from the self-doubts and betrayals which would be a feature of a later ‘cynical’ school of espionage writing.¹⁸ The oxymoronic quality of the Fleming stories as both nostalgic and hip has been captured by Wesley Wark, who has argued that, “*Bond and his readers escaped from history back into the adventures of an earlier day and forward into a titillating world of consumerism, sexual liberation (of sorts), and global travel*” (1990: 6).

While the Fleming novels sold only moderately before appearing as paperbacks in the late 1950s, their translation to the screen, beginning with *Dr No* in 1962, resulted in a cultural phenomenon and a considerable upsurge in sales of the books. The writing of espionage fiction in Britain, and elsewhere, underwent considerable change in the face of James Bond and led to even greater popularity of the spy novel; although admirers of Fleming, on his death in 1964, thought that, “*The prospect of a Bondless future is bleak*” (Rich-

ardson 1964: 18). Of course, many imitators of varying quality entered the market with their omni-competent espionage heroes, as in the case of James Leasor and his agent Dr Jason Love who first appeared in *Passport to Oblivion* (1964), James Mayo and his agent Charles Hood who first appeared in *Hammerhead* (1964),¹⁹ and of James Munro and his agent James Craig who made his début in *The Man Who Sold Death* (1964).²⁰ Few critics could take James Bond seriously, and this approach was reflected in the writing of some comic spy stories which parodied the style and characters of the Fleming originals, evident in Peter O'Donnell's re-gendering of the super agent in *Modesty Blaise* (1965), John Gardner's anti-heroic Boysie Oakes novels which commenced with *The Liquidator* in 1964, and in the hip reformulations of Adam Diment's *The Dolly Dolly Spy* (1967) and *The Bang Bang Birds* (1968). The most significant response though to Fleming and his secret agent was in the reaction within espionage literature which has been termed 'anti-Bond'. This was a conscious effort to dispense with the fantasy elements, exotic locales and conservative postures of novels such as *Moonraker* (1955) and *Thunderball* (1961), and to introduce a more despairing and critical tone to the stories. Writing in 1969 in response to the emergence of two schools, film critic Raymond Durnat proposed the bifurcation of the spy cycle into that of "cool" and that of "alienated" (5).²¹ The Fleming originals have been understood as narratives of reassurance in a context of retreat from empire and national decline, while the anti-Bond dynamic was a more realistic response to Britain's imperial and economic predicament in the post-Suez period, as well as a more complex moral treatment of the business of espionage in the face of a series of humiliating spy scandals which cast the social and political elite in a damaging light. As such they represent a critique of the certainties of the Fleming approach, being radical and critical of an authority which is presented now as far from benevolent or progressive, a world of fumbling uncertainty, fluid allegiances and only vague distinctions between the combatants straddling the ideological divide.

In 1991, a piece in the *Mail on Sunday* asked its readers, "How do you like your spies? Fact or fiction?" By that time, the bifurcation of the spy story was seen to have delivered up two choices. Did readers prefer (a): "dreary old pen-pushing civil servants hanging about for days on end, watching, waiting, and dourly playing it by the book on the off-chance that something will come of it?" Or did they prefer (b): "exotic wild-eyed loonies with hilarious accents, preposterous aliases, invisible ink, transmitters under the floorboards, and a larderful of false-bottomed pickle jars containing secret codes?" (24 November).

Choice (a), the new 'realistic school' of espionage writing, had emerged in the hands of Len Deighton and John le Carré and their novels *The Ipcress File* (1962) and *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). Such writers published

in the shadow of the Suez debacle and the exposure of the Cambridge Spies, and the theme of decline and betrayal occupied a central place in their fiction. The novels had a considerable commercial and critical impact and their tales of treachery, manipulation and perfidy owed something to the anti-romanticism of Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden* stories of the late 1920s with their despondent and bleak atmosphere, as well as to the class antagonism of the literary Angry Young Men of the late 1950s. Indeed, the historian Dominic Sandbrook has referred to *The Ipcress File* as the "Lucky Jim of spy fiction: the story of a bright, disrespectful, impecunious provincial upstart who dislikes his elegant, well-bred superiors and keenly feels his social exclusion" (2006: 625). In the face of this writing, the gentleman adventurer, outside of 'fantasy' narratives, could only be appreciated as an anachronism and a fitting figure for critique or satire. The emphasis in the new stories has been seen, instead, as focusing on "adventures of bureaucratic work in the secret states of 'post-industrial' capitalism" (Denning 1987: 6), and the secret agent consolidated as "spy as organizational man" (Price 1996: 88). Accordingly, in a process in tune with the democratising mood of the 1960s, the traditional archetype began to be replaced, first by the post-World War II generation of grammar school-educated boys, as with the nameless spy in the Deighton series of novels, and later by protagonists with genuinely working-class backgrounds, such as James Mitchell's David Callan and Brian Freemantle's Charlie Muffin, characters often in conflict with their higher-class superiors and colleagues.²² The Deighton stories *Funeral in Berlin* (1964) and *Billion Dollar Brain* (1966), and the le Carré stories *The Looking-Glass War* (1965) and *A Small Town in Germany* (1968) remained at the forefront of this progressive style of espionage literature in the decade, works which were felt to "mirror the soul of the state" in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s (Wark 1990: 7). The literate le Carré, in particular, was seen to offer a substantial critique of British society, stating in a 1976 interview that, the "figure of the spy does seem to me to be almost infinitely capable of exploitation for purposes of articulating all sorts of submerged things in our society" (quoted in Sauerberg 1984: 13). Other important new writing included *The Berlin Memorandum*, in which Adam Hall introduced his popular series agent Quiller, and *The Naked Runner* (both 1965) by Francis Clifford, which developed the trend for more complex, reflective and sophisticated spy stories. Occasionally, a major writer would explore the possibilities of the spy genre, as did Anthony Burgess in his brilliant and entertaining *Tremor of Intent* in 1966, and such contributions added credibility to the notion of the 'literary spy thriller'.²³

Writing in 1972, the novelist and critic Julian Symons felt that the spy story was likely to decline as a consequence of apparent exhaustion, of both writers and readers, following the efforts of Fleming, Deighton, le Carré and many others (246). In fact, British spy fiction proved resilient and many new spy

authors joined the fray. Notable newcomers were Ted Allbeury and Anthony Price, and these were complemented by an upsurge in thrillers more generally, influenced by the extraordinary success of writers like Alistair MacLean and Frederick Forsyth, especially the latter's *The Day of the Jackal* (1971), the first in a new-style of 'documentary thriller', which, along with the writing of Ken Follett in the 1970s, have posed "*elaborate secret histories*" (Denning 1987: 6). There have been further claims for the death or decline of the spy novel. Rausch and Rausch, writing in the late 1970s, echoed Symons and complained of an "*overworked genre*" and the expectation of a "*falling off in the number and quality of espionage novels in the years immediately ahead*" (1993: 102). However, the predictions have proved false and the spy novel has resolutely refused to disappear. Perhaps, as one journal has claimed, "*The spy novel is an essential literary genre of our present imagination*" and as such is unlikely to go away (*Spectator*, 27 December 2003).

The period of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* in the 1980s, and shortly thereafter the end of the Cold War in 1989-91, seemed to remove a fundamental rationale of the modern spy story, and in a wider sense the need for expensive large-scale intelligence organisations, which in America and Britain had attracted damning criticism in the period since the 1970s. However, the threat of terrorism that emerged in a more extensive form following the attack on New York and Washington in 2001 has provided the context for a new spate of Anglo-American thrillers in which security services counter global terrorist organisations. There has also been a notable nostalgia in the writing of contemporary spy fiction, a rejection of the "*chaotic present*" as one reviewer has put it, with many authors exploring the recent history of World War II and the Cold War in their espionage stories (Brooke 2004: 19). In Britain, leading writers of this school are Charles Cumming (*Trinity Six*, 2011), David Downing (*Silesian Station*, 2008) and John Lawton (*Blackout*, 1995); while the foremost American practitioner is Alan Furst (*The Polish Officer*, 1995), who has spent much time in Europe and writes about the intrigues leading up to the Second World War and during the early wartime period. The lasting relevance of spy fiction is also evidenced in the fact that front rank authors continue to turn their hand to espionage literature, often with a historical theme, as with William Boyd and *Restless* (2006) and *Waiting for Sunrise* (2012), Sebastian Faulks and *Charlotte Gray* (1999) John Banville and *The Untouchable* (1997) and Ian McEwan with *The Innocent* (1990) and *Sweet Tooth* (2012).

The spy story and its sister genres of conspiracy and terrorist thrillers remain relevant in the contemporary period. It is instructive to appreciate the shift in focus of the most established and acclaimed of all living espionage novelists, John le Carré, who responded to *Glasnost* in *The Russia House* (1989), and has since begun to examine the worlds of the secret arms trade in

The Night Manager (1993), modern corporate corruption and conspiracy in *The Constant Gardener* (2000) and the new terrorism in *A Most Wanted Man* (2008).²⁴ There is now a considerable overlap in the fields of the modern thriller, in which espionage constitutes a greater or lesser element, and in which the complex moral issues and political intangibles of the contemporary world can be explored.²⁵

Spy history, espionage and popular culture

The one thing to rival the British love of a bit of weather is a decent bit of spying.

(Alan Rusbridger, *Observer*, 18 January 1987)

For most of the twentieth century, representations of intelligence in popular culture were far and away the most influential factors shaping public attitudes and perceptions.

(Len Scott and Peter Jackson 2004: 19)

Perhaps as a result of the many charges against MI5 and the impact of spy cases and spy novels, many people seem prepared to believe anything about the secret services.

(Pincher 1991: 298)

There has been an uncommon amount of concern, considering it is a genre of popular literature, regarding the relationship of spy stories with historical reality. While some literary scholars are at pains to deny the mimetic qualities of espionage fiction (Snyder 2011), this view rather ignores the widespread cultural assumption that spy fiction observes a discernible association with spy reality. As a historian of British Intelligence and secrecy has observed, “*Rightly or wrongly, spy fiction has to a large extent shaped public perceptions of intelligence*”; and accordingly popular culture has established the dominant frame of reference regarding the secret organisations and their operations (Moran 2011a: 48; Willmetts and Moran 2013: 52). It is a viewpoint echoed by a journalist who, appreciative that actual espionage is disconnected from common experience and confused by myth, has commented: “*Much of what the public knows about the UK’s Secret Service, or MI6, comes from the world of fiction – whether Ian Fleming’s James Bond or John le Carré’s George Smiley*”.²⁶ This is a significant point in a society in which details and information about the security and intelligence services have been actively suppressed, a situation more widely appreciated since the notorious ‘*Spycatcher* Affair’ of the mid-1980s when the authorities feared that the floodgates would be opened and former officers would “*blow the gaff on all the national secrets*” (Rimington 2002: 188).²⁷ As such, rumours abound, and, appropriately some

might feel given the context, disinformation freely circulates. In such an uncertain environment, famously described as a “*wilderness of mirrors*” by the legendary American spy chief James Jesus Angleton, the framework for public knowledge and awareness regarding the secret services and clandestine activities will be shaped by the discourses of journalism (never to be entirely trusted), the published memoir (which has to be officially sanctioned), and the popular fictions of espionage, which, as far as a wary public might be concerned, carry an equal validity in a shadowy world of legal gagging, half-truths, lies and deceptions.²⁸

Cultural critic Toby Miller has written of “*slippage*” between reality and fantasy, between history and fiction, in the long and ongoing relationship of espionage and society (2003: 38). Chapman Pincher, perhaps uniquely qualified as a journalist specialising in security, a writer on espionage and a spy novelist, has concluded: “*Since anything is possible, it is easy for people to delude themselves. Conditioned by spy fiction, as well as by fact, they are prepared to believe anything about the intelligence services*” (1991: 9). After all, as Robin Winks reminds us: “*what is most important in the study of history is what people believe to be true*”; and it is his contention that spy fiction is capable of being real in “*tone and fact and question and approach*” (1993: 223, 231).²⁹ In such a context, espionage fiction can be argued to matter.

Historians, especially in dealing with the period of the early 20th century, have acknowledged the impact of spy stories on historical developments. Christopher Andrew emphasises the “*literary war*” promulgated by William Le Queux and Erskine Childers and the impact of “*spy mania*” on policy-makers (1985: 36, 43, 58). He recounts how pioneer intelligence officers, sadly lacking in knowledge and experience, consulted some of the more successful spy novels for insights and guidance (51); how patriotic young gentlemen officers, inspired by the example of Carruthers and Davies in *The Riddle of the Sands*, set off on spying expeditions to the Continent, often getting themselves into hot water (80-81; see also Seed 1992: 70-73 and Moran and Johnson 2010: 7-12); and how even some senior members of the emerging secret services delighted in such cloak and dagger affectations of espionage as elaborate disguises and enjoyed the whole activity as “*capital sport*”, an image which originated in the more fanciful of the tales perpetrated by the spy novelists (76). The interplay between reality and fantasy in espionage stories has continued to interest historians and intelligence specialists. The political scientist Adam Svendsen defends spy fiction as a legitimate source, capable of providing valuable insights into intelligence topics. He reminds us that, as with espionage literature, there is a “*close ... blending of fact, fiction and fantasy in the real world of intelligence*”, that “*serious*” spy fiction observes a “*close relationship*” to “*actual-reality*”, thus creating for itself a sense of plausibility

and authority (2009: 15). This is surely a more reasoned engagement with the complex issues involved than the blanket rejection of spy fiction by some intelligence 'insiders' who baulk at the confusion some writers show regarding actual intelligence organisations, the fanciful technical gadgets at the disposal of some agents, and the impossible claims made for modern technologies like spy satellites.³⁰

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest a meaningful connection between the imaginary and the real in the realm of espionage. Various spy novelists, including Ian Fleming, Len Deighton and John le Carré, have been attributed with the accolade of being eagerly consulted and read by secret service organisations. The anthologist Hugh Greene, brother of the celebrated novelist Graham Greene, has recounted his personal experience of visiting a favourite bookshop to scout for espionage titles, only to discover that everything in the field had been acquired by a "*foreign government*" (2007: 235). The romanticism bestowed on spying in some of the literature led to individuals seeking employment in the secret world. Tod Hoffman has volunteered that his decision to become an intelligence officer with the Canadian Secret Service in the late 1980s, "*was very much a result of being exposed to spies in pop culture*" (2001: xii). This was also the case with Daphne Park, who joined MI6 in the 1940s and rose to the position of a controller. She has gone on record as saying: "*I suppose it did start with reading Kim, reading John Buchan and reading Sapper and Bulldog Drummond; and I think from a quite early age I did want to go into intelligence. I don't know what kind or how it would be. But I always wanted it*".³¹ Former chief of MI6 Sir Colin McColl has stated how the positive impression that spy fiction has bestowed on the British, at least the impression that British Intelligence counts, has been beneficial in establishing contacts and recruiting agents overseas, as such sources from their reading, "*felt we knew more than anybody else*".³² Even the legendary East German spy boss Markus Wolf was capable of confusing fact with fiction, such as when he cast a complimentary eye on the British secret services and claimed: "*Maybe the English were the best, these James Bonds, because they were the ones I knew least about*" (quoted in Kamm 1996: 72).

A crucial element in the sense that British spy fiction can be taken seriously, that it has some meaningful claim to verisimilitude, is that a considerable proportion of the writers of the stories had or claimed some actual experience of intelligence work (Masters 1987). Unfailingly stated in dust jacket blurbs and in author biographies, this seemingly afforded the writers some legitimacy and counted for a public which had a suspicion of other providers of information and perspective on the secret world. As novelist John le Carré has noted of his own experience, "*It has always been my concern not to be authentic but to be credible, to use the deep background I have from the years I spent*

in intelligence work to present premises that were useful to my stories and that I knew were rooted in experience" (quoted in Sanoff 1989: 106). The penetration of these authors into the structures of national security and intelligence varied greatly. Men like Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, John le Carré and Alan Judd had actual experience of operations within the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or Naval Intelligence, while others such as John Buchan fulfilled more general intelligence and propaganda roles during wartime.³³ Some, like William Le Queux, Erskine Childers and Dennis Wheatley, existed on the fringes of military and foreign office activity, but by dint of social class and political connections were privilege to insights unavailable to the general population. Then there are the special cases of Maxwell Knight, Stella Rimington and Douglas Hurd. Knight and Rimington were both senior figures in MI5, the former the author of two thrillers, *Crime Cargo* (1934) and *Gunmen's Holiday* (1935), which Eric Homberger has declared as "*certainly of interest to students of popular culture, and of the mentality of the British intelligence community*" (1988: 312), and the latter a popular current practitioner having retired as Director-General of the Security Service. Hurd was a senior Conservative politician who spent time at the United Nations, and later served as both Home Secretary and as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and who published a series of political thrillers from the early 1970s onwards. The myth of the secret agent-author was such that it was invoked even when the writer had only a distant claim on secret service experience, as in the case of Bryan Forbes whose lowly experience in Field Security early in World War Two could hardly have had much bearing on his contemporary espionage novels written four decades later.³⁴

While lacking direct involvement in clandestine service, another substantial group of spy authors could claim special insight through experience in journalism, very often in the political columns which had given them access to the corridors of power. To this group belong Lionel Davidson, Francis Clifford, Gavin Lyle, Hugh McLeave, Anthony Price and Brian Freemantle. An exceptional case is that of Chapman Pincher, author of several spy novels in the 1970s, who achieved some prominence at the *Daily Express* as a correspondent specialising in defence and intelligence matters, as a journalistic molehunter, and later as author of several non-fiction accounts of the secret world of security and espionage such as *Their Trade is Treachery* (1981), *Traitors: The Labyrinths of Treason* (1987) and *A Web of Deception: The Spycatcher Affair* (1987). Such a display of expertise is likely to count when the reading public engage with the writer's fictions of espionage; and the fact that spy authors like Bernard Newman (the atom spies), Brian Freemantle (the KGB and the CIA), Jeremy Duns (the Soviet double-agent Oleg Penkovsky) and Alan Judd (Mansfield Cumming, first chief of the SIS) have turned their hand to factual

accounts of spy scandals, intelligence organisations and legendary spymasters further lends authenticity to their imaginative writing.

Spy stories deal with ostensible historical reality, their plots, themes and conspiratorial frameworks being shaped by some discernible geopolitical context. The historian Brett F. Woods thus treats them as “*hybrid texts*”; ones that, “*blend fictional premise with certain non-fiction elements*” and which ultimately “*assume complete historical authority*” (2008: 2). The established expression for this process and outcome is ‘faction’, and it has been common for critics and scholars to relate this term to spy fiction. Nigel West has argued, contrary to what is commonly assumed, that there has been much written about the British intelligence community from within, and he includes classic spy fiction alongside such factual forms as memoirs (2004: 122). Some writers of spy fiction have structured their novels in ways suggestive of reality, using literary devices normally associated with non-fiction to create what the historian Wesley Wark has called, the “*artifice of apparent realism*” (1990: 1). Important in this respect have been *The Riddle of the Sands*, in which Erskine Childers partly structures the narrative through the use of a diary and appends nautical maps which position the reader in relation to a discernible actuality, and the novels of Len Deighton, with their celebrated ‘scholarly apparatus’, typically a series of appendices which ostensibly provide detailed insight into various aspects of the clandestine world of the secret agent. Wark also invokes the notion of ‘faction’ in his discussion of espionage literature, claiming spy stories as a “*variety of popular history in disguise*” (3).

A fundamental critical concern regarding spy fiction has been the apparent contrast between the ‘romantic’ and the ‘realistic’ schools, and the genre in its development has oscillated between the two poles. In the beginning, there was Le Queux to place alongside Childers; the heroic school of the First World War period eventually gave way to the verisimilitude and commitment of Ambler and Greene; and swung back again towards fantasy fulfilment and the simpler formula under the influence of Ian Fleming and his popular creation James Bond. There was a palpable relief when the spy story re-assumed a literary direction in the hands of John le Carré and attention focused on the new realism of the spy story. This cycle of adjustment, reaction and rejection has characterised the writing and consumption of espionage fiction in Britain and continues to shape the production and appreciation of thrillers of terrorism and the meticulously researched historical spy novel of the present times. The history of the spy genre thus reveals a “*typology of alternating modes*”, as Wesley Wark puts it, in which the “*thrill of the adventurous romance vies for command with the politically charged narrative of societal danger*”, and a

sense of realism, through narrative construction, authorial biography and reader strategies, occupies a crucial critical importance (7).

The spy story in Britain is strongly implicated in ideas about nation, class and gender. Literary historian Sam Goodman has recently claimed “*spy fiction's central place within the British cultural imaginary*”, noting that the “*figure of the spy has always been bound up with nationhood and what it means to be British*”, and commenting on how an iconic character such as the super-agent James Bond can serve as a “*key component*” of national cultural identity (2016: 1). The figure of the spy was swiftly extended to the screen, initially in the cinema, and later on television. There, the secret agent proved a popular and enduring character, winning even more supporters to the fictions of espionage.

Espionage on film and television before 1960

Outside of wartime, the spy drama on film and television in Britain was not prolific before 1960, but was statistically significant. The majority of these productions were routine thrillers and only occasionally was a major filmmaker attracted to the material. The early period of cinema threw up a few spy pictures dealing with intrigue keyed to the actual conflicts of the day; such as the very first example, Robert Paul's *Shooting a Boer Spy* of 1899, and his subsequent *Execution as Spies of Two Japanese Officers* (1904, Russo-Japanese War). Overall, the silent period produced little that was substantial, although there was a predictable vogue for invasion, spy and terrorist dramas in the period leading up to and including the early stages of the First World War. This readily chimed with ‘Spy Menace’ alarms which were being heralded in the popular press. Pre-war examples included the London Film Company's *The Peril of the Fleet* and Hepworth's *The Spy* both released in July 1909, London's *England's Menace* released to great success in June 1914, and British and Colonial's *The Great Anarchist Mystery* released in January 1912 (Gifford 1966: 6-7). A cycle of spy dramas was unleashed on the opening of hostilities and film historian Rachel Low has epitomised the flavour and characterisations of these pictures. “*German spies were represented as cads, with an habitual tendency to assault English girls*”. Sly but fortunately extremely clumsy, “*they were kept busy tracking down numerous secret inventions and deadly explosives upon which the outcome of the war depended*”. Meanwhile, “*their honourable British Secret Service antagonists toiled to outwit them, thereby saving such items of national importance as troop trains, London's water supply and even the Houses of Parliament*” (1950: 178).

The quickly-produced films had such titles as *The German Spy Peril*, *Guarding Britain's Secrets*, *Britain's Secret Treaty* and *The Kaiser's Spies* (all 1914). One particularly interesting example was *The Raid of 1915* (1914), which derived

from William Le Queux's famous novel *The Invasion of 1910* published in 1906 and demonstrated the connection between the popular literature of the period and the production of spy dramas in the cinema. The trade paper *Bioscope* dismissed such pictures as the "usual orgy of ridiculous and impossible sensationalism" (quoted in Low 1950: 179), and the cycle clearly drew inspiration from the many spy yarns which featured in the newspapers and magazines at the time. Following the first flush of panic and patriotism, the spy film settled down to calmer and more considered drama, as in the case of Cecil Hepworth's *The Man Who Stayed at Home* (1915), an adaptation from the stage, and Broadwest's *A Munition Girl's Romance* (1916), in which espionage only played a part in a broader drama.

British producers in the 1920s turned regularly to writers of popular thrillers such as E. Phillips Oppenheim, Edgar Wallace, 'Sapper' and Sax Rohmer for stories and characters to film, and some of these touched on the themes of international intrigue and threats to national security. During 1923-4, the Stoll Company released a series of short dramas featuring Rohmer's master criminal Dr Fu-Manchu, starring H. Agar Lyons and Fred Paul as Nayland Smith the government agent who opposes the evil genius. Two films were released featuring the popular character of 'Bulldog' Drummond, an eponymously-titled Anglo-Dutch co-production of 1922 featuring Carlyle Blackwell as the hero, and the more substantial *Bulldog Drummond's Third Round* (1925) starring Jack Buchanan. The first film version of Edgar Wallace's hugely popular *The Four Just Men* appeared in 1921, produced at Stoll, and later in the decade a new company was founded, British Lion, which held the rights to Wallace's works and produced such mystery thrillers as *The Ringer* and *The Man Who Changed his Name* (both 1928), and *The Clue of the New Pin* (1929).³⁵ Surprisingly, John Buchan was little filmed in the period, although there was a modest version of *Huntingtower* produced at Welsh-Pearson in 1928. An altogether more serious production was Herbert Wilcox's *Dawn*, filmed towards the end of the silent period in 1928, the true story of Nurse Edith Cavell who was shot by the Germans in Belgium in 1915 for spying. The film was graced by a much-admired performance from Sybil Thorndike and encountered serious censorship difficulties, there being some resentment that such a noble theme should be turned to profit, as well as anxiety that the picture might upset the Germans at a time when rapprochement was the political requirement of the day (Robertson 1984). Gainsborough's *The Crooked Billet* (1929) had the distinction of being the last silent and the first sound British spy film, it being released in both versions. A small group of films were produced in response to the Bolshevik assumption of power in Russia in 1917 and the declaration of worldwide communist revolution. *The Flight Commander* (1928) was a silent picture which dealt with the Soviet threat to British interests in China, while the sound productions *Forbidden*

Territory (1934), from the novel by Dennis Wheatley, and *Knight Without Armour* (1937), from the novel by James Hilton, were conservative responses to the international situation and featured British heroes dealing with injustice deep inside Russia.

The return of European tensions in the 1930s once again provided a rationale for out and out espionage dramas and the appearance of several memorable pictures, capitalising, as Marcia Landy has expressed it, on an “*atmosphere of uncertainty, paranoia, and physical and verbal belligerence*” (1991:124).³⁶ Influential on the cycle of spy thrillers was *Rome Express* (1932), a crime picture produced at Gaumont-British, which starred the great German actor Conrad Veidt and featured a thrilling Continental train-bound drama that would be imitated by such later pictures as *Night Train to Munich* (1940) and *Sleeping Car to Trieste* (1948). Veidt found regular employment in spy pictures in the British cinema of the decade, playing honourable First World War German agents who are outwitted by able British counterparts in *Dark Victory* (1937) and *The Spy in Black* (1939), and of necessity switching to Danish nationality in the wartime *Contraband* (1940) so that he can be opposed to Nazi machinations. Another significant production set during the Great War was Victor Saville’s *I Was a Spy* (1933), based on the true exploits of Marthe Cnockaert, a Belgian who spied for the British before her arrest and imprisonment by the Germans.³⁷ Historical settings were occasionally provided for spy dramas as in the classic *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934) and *The Spy of Napoleon* (1935). While espionage never became a regular feature of the costume film, the former, revisited in 1937 and 1950, was updated as a successful wartime propaganda picture in *Pimpernel Smith* (1941), in which the ‘Pimpernel’ worked secretly in Germany to save victims of Nazi oppression. The character was an important embodiment of the consummate English gentleman, witty, tough and resourceful, able and prepared to confront European tyranny and defend decency and civilisation, whether it is French revolutionaries or National Socialist gangsters (Richards 1986b).

By far the most important contribution to the spy film in the cinema came from Alfred Hitchcock. His famous series of six thrillers produced at Gaumont-British in the mid-late 1930s established the gold standard for this type of sophisticated action film and attracted favourable critical attention which had previously ignored the genre. As Alan Booth has observed regarding Hitchcock:

No film director has ever produced more first-quality spy films, many of which have become classics; none has consistently filmed better quality screenplays or introduced more plot devices to draw the viewer into his films and to heighten and sustain audience tension. (1991: 140)

Of the six thrillers, five were espionage dramas and each of these was derived from a well-known literary source. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) was loosely drawn from ‘Sapper’, *The 39 Steps* (1935) from the John Buchan novel, *Secret Agent* (1936) from Maugham’s *Ashenden* stories, *Sabotage* (1936) was based on the Conrad novel *The Secret Agent*, and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) was from the popular mystery story *The Wheel Spins* by Ethel Lina White. There would remain a close relationship between spy screen and spy literature in the British experience, especially in regard of the leading film and television productions, which, with few exceptions, have been adaptations of the more commercially promising writing or the most critically acclaimed novels. This is not to say that Hitchcock did not achieve something entirely cinematic with his pictures, which in their turn have been greatly influential on the spy drama in Britain and elsewhere, as, indeed, have his later espionage thrillers made in Hollywood, pictures such as *Foreign Correspondent* (US, 1940), *Notorious* (US, 1946) and *North by Northwest* (US, 1959), but to make the necessary acknowledgement that the filmmaker absorbed and re-articulated qualities established in popular literature and consciously observed a tradition while translating well-known stories to the screen. As the film historian Tom Ryall has pointed out, some of the most successful elements that we associate with the Hitchcock thriller were already stock in trade for John Buchan writing a generation earlier:

The general quality of adventure, the themes of fear and guilt, the narrative patterns of flight and pursuit, the climatic combat, the theme of the ‘thin protection of civilisation’ to quote Buchan’s own words from his novel The Power House, the secret assassination gang working against established governments ... (1986: 126)

Hitchcock’s brilliance was to give these fundamentals visual form and imbue them with his own characteristic concerns with gender and sexuality. *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *The 39 Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes* were generally the most successful, offering as they did quick-paced narratives featuring heroes by accident, while *The Secret Agent* and *Sabotage* were centred on a different literary tradition, dealing with the world of professional agents, and the films reflect some of the moral ambiguity and bleakness of the originals. Hitchcock’s transformation of the Buchan spy thriller should also be understood in relation to the revisionism of the espionage novel in the 1930s in the hands of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, a set of influences and counter-influences which have not been sufficiently acknowledged in the literature (Burton 2017).

As British society geared up for war in 1938-9, a spate of spy films was released into cinemas reflecting the contemporary anxiety regarding national

security. Titles included *The Last Barricade* and *Anything to Declare?* (both 1938), and *Q Planes*, *Secret Journey*, *Spies of the Air* and *An Englishman's Home* (all 1939). *Strange Boarders* (1938), in which intelligence man Tommy Blythe interrupts his honeymoon to investigate the discovery of vital Air Ministry blueprints on a woman killed in a road accident, was taken from a novel by the veteran writer of spy fiction E. Phillips Oppenheim. The wartime period inevitably saw the production of a variety of pictures which dealt with wartime missions, the activities of resistance groups, counter-espionage measures and other aspects of the secret war. Representative examples would be *Cottage to Let* (1941), *The Day Will Dawn* (1942), *Squadron Leader X* (1942), *The Yellow Canary* (1943), *Hotel Reserve* (1944) and *The Man from Morocco* (1945).³⁸ The films dealing with the secret war demonstrated national vigilance, ingenuity and preparedness at a time of acute anxiety regarding the safety of the realm. They therefore served as a welcome reassurance for audiences and began to decline in number in the later period of the war when victory was becoming more certain.³⁹ An exceptional production was Ealing Studio's *The Next of Kin* (1942), which dramatised the propaganda theme of 'Careless Talk Costs Lives' and the need for constant vigilance. A controversial picture, the film illustrated how loose talk can aid the enemy, and potential blame is evenly distributed throughout society. While thought defeatist in some quarters, the film was a critical and popular success (Richards 1986a).

The post-war years were witness to a number of pictures which revealed and celebrated aspects of the secret war. The activities of the Special Operations Executive were featured in *Against the Wind* (1948), *Odette* (1950) and *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958), the latter films commemorating the remarkable heroism of female agents who served behind enemy lines. Outstandingly successful deception operations against the Germans were dramatised in *The Man Who Never Was* (1956) and *I Was Monty's Double* (1958). Generally popular and successful pictures, these productions were part of a broader cycle of war films in the 1950s which has been appreciated as a nostalgic return to the wartime years (Chapman 1996). While such films served as a form of reassurance, a more anxious response to the decade was evident in contemporary spy thrillers which were framed by the Cold War, the threat of subversion and the possibility of nuclear annihilation.

There was a variety of responses within the British film industry to the convulsions of the Cold War. Most visible was the adaptation of the classic literature of the ideological conflict, in the form of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1954), made with CIA support, and *1984* (1954, television as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1956, film).⁴⁰ While a film such as *Seven Days to Noon* (1950) dealt with the moral issues and widespread fears centring on atomic science (Guy 2000), a more overt treatment of espionage was evident in another group of films.

The shrillest response to fears of a fifth column of communist agents working in Britain to undermine democracy was *High Treason* (1951), which featured a gallery of malcontents and debased types from all stations in British society engaged in sabotage. Generally, though, British cinema did not produce a cycle of paranoid films as had appeared in Hollywood under the sway of McCarthyism, although *Conspirator* (1949), made by MGM in Britain and dealing with a Guards Officer trading secrets with an unidentified enemy, can be appreciated in this light and starred the arch anti-communist Robert Taylor.

More typical were films which featured intrepid Britons tackling injustice or securing secrets behind the Iron Curtain. Among the first of these was *State Secret* (1950), which had an American surgeon (Douglas Fairbanks Jnr.) lured to a totalitarian state to operate on an ailing dictator. When the leader dies, the innocent doctor is forced to flee to save his own life. *Highly Dangerous* (1950) was unusual in that it had a female protagonist played by Margaret Lockwood, a scientist, who is persuaded to go behind the Iron Curtain to investigate reports concerning biological warfare experiments. The film is now chiefly important for its script by the master spy writer Eric Ambler who adapted it from his first novel *The Dark Frontier* (1936). These two films served to construct for audiences the image of oppression, distrust and secrecy which characterised societies in Eastern Europe. Occasionally, a leading filmmaker turned his hand to the espionage drama or political thriller and films of quality emerged in the form of Carol Reed's *The Man Between* (1953) and *Our Man in Havana* (1959, from the satirical novel by Graham Greene), Thorold Dickinson's *Secret People* (1952) and Peter Glenville's *The Prisoner* (1955). More common, though, were the rash of spy thrillers produced as second features, with titles such as *Deadly Nightshade* (1953), *Little Red Monkey* and *They Can't Hang Me* (both 1955), *Cloak Without Dagger* (1956), *The Secret Man* (1958) and *Sentenced for Life* (1960). Most of these were dully routine and aimed at undemanding audiences who still enjoyed a whole evening's entertainment at the cinema. A more interesting example of this type of picture was *Suspect* (1960), produced and directed by John and Roy Boulting as a conscious effort to raise the quality of the B-film. The picture, from a post-war novel by Nigel Balchin, dealt with a plot to publish secret research into germ warfare and was more literate than the average low-budget thriller (O'Sullivan 2000). The competition for scientific supremacy between East and West, especially as it affected military capability and threat, was a standard theme in the fictions of the Cold War, and the figure of the traitorous, defecting or duped scientist was a common character.

The early period of the television drama in Britain in the 1950s also came to some accommodation with the spy thriller, although espionage was nowhere

as popular in the production schedules as the contemporary police drama and series such as *Fabian of Scotland Yard* (BBC, 1954-56), *Colonel March of Scotland Yard* (ITV, 1955), *Dixon of Dock Green* (BBC, 1955-76), *Mark Saber* (ITV, 1957-62) and *Dial 999* (ITV, 1958). Although it is difficult to assess programmes from this period as the majority are lost, the fledgeling service mounted a handful of prestige espionage drama series as with the six-part adaptations of *Epitaph for a Spy* (BBC, 1953) and *The Schirmer Inheritance* (ITV, 1957), both from Eric Ambler. Classics such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (BBC, 1950 and 1955, and ITV, 1955-56) were also obvious choices for television producers.

Recent history was treated in several drama series which centred on the experience of espionage in the Second World War. *Man Trap* and *Secret Mission* (both ITV, 1956) dramatised true stories of wartime espionage, while the Anglo-American series *O.S.S.* (ITV, 1957), dealt with the wartime American Office of Strategic Services and various cloak and dagger escapades on the Continent. *Spy Catcher* (BBC, 1959-61), comprising of four seasons and 24 episodes, was based on the exploits of Lt.-Col. Oreste Pinto of counter-intelligence whose job had been to prevent the infiltration of Britain by enemy spies as recounted in the published *Spycatcher* (1952) and *Friend or Foe?* (1953).⁴¹ At the very end of the decade there appeared an updated adaptation of Edgar Wallace's warhorse *The Four Just Men*, which commenced its broadcast early in 1960 and which featured a quartet of wartime buddies, a Briton (Jack Hawkins), two Americans (Richard Conte and Dan Dailey) and an Italian (Vittorio De Sica), banding together to combat injustice and international intrigue in various picturesque locales around Europe. The series of 39 episodes was possibly the first multi-national lead show designed to sell to an international market, a strategy that would be greatly extended in the 1960s.⁴² From a modest beginning in the 1950s, the treatment of espionage on British television would progress considerably in the following decade, given the expansion of the broadcasting service, more generous budgets, and significant cultural developments in literature and film which began to position the fictional secret agent as an iconic figure of the 1960s.

Methodology

There have been various historical, literary and critical accounts of espionage and spy stories in Britain.⁴³ The following is a cultural and historical examination of British spy dramas in the cinema and on television since 1960. As already set out in this introduction, the spy screen is here situated generally in the two dominant contexts of secret agent literature and espionage history. Literary espionage established the significant themes, styles and pleasures for the imaginative treatment of spying, and the majority of films and those tele-

vision dramas that have been taken more seriously were derived from pre-existing novels, plays and stories. Similarly, public awareness and perceptions of espionage and national security established a framework of audience understanding and expectation to which producers of the spy screen responded.

Like jazz, the spy story comes in 'hot' and 'cool' styles. The first chapter deals with the 'spy thriller' in the cinema, the 'hot' style which developed as a significant cycle under the influence of the James Bond pictures that began to appear from 1962. Such films prioritised excitement and featured action-oriented secret agents most often sent on missions to exotic locales. Such stories belonged to the tradition of 'sensation' or 'romantic' spy fiction, a form colourfully labelled "*Great Bad Writing*". The second chapter treats what I have called 'espionage drama' in the cinema, the alternative 'cold' style of the spy story. Such films, fewer in number, tended to be adaptations of the new-style spy fiction of John le Carré, Len Deighton and their adherents which began to appear in the early 1960s, characterised by more serious themes and sometimes literary ambition, and in contrast labelled "*Great Good Writing*" (*Time*, 3 October 1977). The third and fourth chapters examine spy dramas on television, first the thriller and then the literary type. This gives attention to many drama series and serials previously unconsidered, as well as works in the espionage genre by leading playwrights such as Dennis Potter, Alan Bennett and Stephen Poliakoff. The fifth and sixth chapters take as their focus historical spy dramas, first imaginative treatments of the past which have in many cases cast a nostalgic net around the classics of spy and thriller fiction, and then the often controversial dramatic accounts of agents, spies and operations from history, most obviously and notably the infamous Cambridge Spies who have bewitched and enthralled generations of the British public. The seventh chapter takes a look at the 'secret state' thriller, a largely unconsidered cycle of films and television dramas of the 1980s which adopted a conspiratorial view towards the intelligence services, their actions on behalf of reactionaries and political elites, and their malevolent deeds against innocent radicals and liberals who were demonised as subversives. The final chapter provides an overview of the spy drama since the end of the Cold War. In a slightly more tentative manner, it examines the variety of responses to espionage on the screen after what many felt was the loss of the main rationale for the modern spy story.

The study is the first attempt to bring a broad view to the British spy screen in the period. The separation of spy thrillers and espionage dramas into different lineages, attention on both film and television, a discussion of both costume and historical dramas, and treatment of the 'secret state' thriller, represent a critical engagement with the spy story on screen; a first attempt to delineate the genre according to its dominant themes and styles. The study also brings the spy screen up-to-date, with a consideration of the spy drama

since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and on to the most recent dramas and dramatisations such as *London Spy* (2015) and *The Night Manager* (2016).

Spies and spying were a popular, durable and significant topic for British film- and television-makers. Following recent work on crime, horror, comedy, historical and heritage films, espionage is, James Bond apart, arguably the last of the significant British screen genres to receive detailed attention.⁴⁴ The following study is also original in that it considers both cinema and television in their engagement with secret agents and espionage. This has been desirable as the screen arts have been increasingly merging in their industrial and representative practices since the 1960s. The approach has set out to be inclusive, dealing with the broad sweep of spy dramas produced for cinema and television in an effort to map out the diverse contours of the spy screen in Britain. This means that many films and drama series are treated for the first time. Such an approach distinguishes the study from previous work on the spy screen in Britain which has been more selective and piecemeal, treating a particularly influential secret agent character such as James Bond, a prominent filmmaker such as Alfred Hitchcock and his spy thrillers in the 1930s, a popular cycle on television such as the adventure series of the 1960s, or have 'cherry picked' from such as these to construct a 'composite' account made-up of 'highlights' in the genre.⁴⁵

It is worthwhile taking a few moments to consider the relative merits of the two approaches. In a recent study of espionage and conspiracy dramas on British television, Joseph Oldham has defended the selective method. He argues for the "*generic case study*", incorporating the "*close analysis of a number of key case study texts*". He suggests that in contrast, the comprehensive approach is unable to provide a "*satisfying depth of analysis*". Of course, this argument can be turned around, and the selective approach can be accused of failing to be adequately representative, and clearly does not lend itself to works of synthesis and synopsis. Oldham's answer to this is to base selection on innovative dramas, those representative of "*moments of intervention*" and marking "*crucial historical turning points*" in the genre (2017: 6-8).⁴⁶

Elsewhere, there has emerged a view that existing approaches to the study of genre have been partial, selective and ultimately misleading. As Steve Neale has argued, "*conventional definitions of genre are often narrow and restrictive*", and that, "*traditional accounts of a number of genres are inaccurate or incomplete*" (2000: 1). Such thinking, of course, runs counter to the type of methodology practised by Oldham. Through an effort to be comprehensive, this study has attempted to avoid the obvious pitfalls, and, as Neale has advocated, it has demonstrated a "*commitment to detailed empirical analysis and thorough industrial and historical research*" (ibid.). Such an approach offers

precision and detail, and while at times producing lengthy treatment, it avoids the deracination of a genre into canonical highlights which often merely serve to illustrate exception rather than the norm. Wishing to be generous, it is possible to accept Oldham's proposition that the selective approach is capable of tracing a "*coherent generic strand*" (2017: 196); however, it does not necessarily follow that it provides a better or preferable treatment of a genre. A genre is an extensive and complex cultural entity, and the study of genre will undoubtedly benefit from the prosecution of both approaches: there is room for the selective and the comprehensive, each with their particular merits; and an open-minded attitude will ensure that scholarship will be the ultimate beneficiary. Here is pursued a study of the spy genre on British screens since 1960. Accordingly, it treats the literary underpinning of many spy dramas, social perspectives on espionage and government secrecy, changing narrative styles and imperatives, altering production contexts and market conditions, varying critical responses to the dramas and their narrative styles, and complex and shifting ideological and historical contexts for the productions. Necessarily, this requires some detail. Individual chapters deal with a particular narrative style, such as the spy thriller and the historical spy drama, with a particular theme, such as the 'secret state' thriller, or with a chronological period, as with the final chapter and its examination of the spyscreen since the end of the Cold War. Chapters and sub-chapters are largely organised chronologically, as this seems the best way to appreciate the development of a genre. Where appropriate, the literary source is briefly introduced, and a plot synopsis provided to familiarise readers with what are often unfamiliar texts and to allow for comparisons across texts regarding characterisations and storylines. Production details provide something of the intention of film- and television-makers, and reviews reveal critical and cultural assumptions about spy stories. The following reveals a considerable amount of new perspective and information about the spy story on British screens. The kind of detail that is not possible in a case-study type approach to genre.

Oldham's useful and insightful account of the espionage and conspiracy thriller on British television since the late 1960s, sets out an account of television drama's changing representation of intelligence institutions. In particular, he uses the generic case-study, selecting six representative examples, to provide a "*fresh perspective on the institutional and aesthetic development of the medium over a period of five decades*" (2017: 6). Its attention to the institution of television, its production styles and aesthetic concerns, distinguishes it from the approach taken here. Literary antecedents, espionage history, and critical reception play a far lesser role in Oldham, and the present author argues for their inclusion in a fuller generic treatment of secret agency on screen. Oldham's focus on 'dramas of national security' means he provides no

attention to historical spy dramas, a major sub-genre of the spy screen. This is especially surprising in terms of the omission of screen dramas treating historical treachery, and especially the dramas dealing with the notorious Cambridge Spies. Oldham's approach also fails to find room for the television dramas authored by leading playwrights, Alan Bennett, Dennis Potter and Stephen Poliakoff, who greatly enriched the spyscreen in the period of the 1970s-90s.

The work presented here incorporates an element of the case-study approach, in that each chapter features one or more 'case files', providing greater focus where it is appropriate, and allowing for a more detailed consideration of a significant author, theme, film or television drama as appropriate. However, each case-file is situated in a larger thematic chapter, ensuring that the fuller generic picture is not lost sight of. The general method adopted is that of cultural-historical analysis, of situating the narratives in their historical and literary contexts, and of considering their critical and popular receptions. The commodity nature of the film cycle, the imitative and exploitative drive of its producers, the timeliness of the stories, and the blatant repetition of its films, has generally consigned its products to 'low culture' and tested the patience of critics. The lack of artistry attached to the spy thriller on British screens since 1960 is arguably a contributory factor in the limited scholarly attention accorded the genre. However, Amanda Klein has argued for an increased attention on film cycles and proposed that a proper focus should incorporate filmmakers, audiences, reviewers, marketing and wider cultural discourses, which in turn offers a more pragmatic, localised approach to genre studies (2011: 5). A cycle develops, she argues, out of an "*originary*" text, a commercially successful template with easily reproducible elements which producers can replicate with the prospect of turning a profit (11). Within a relatively short period of time, exhaustion and frustration sets in, probably first with reviewers who become annoyed, and eventually with the target audience which becomes bored, at which point the cycle is likely to run out of steam (15-16). Klein contends that a focus on the film cycle, through the "*re-visitation*" of sites of "*release, promotion, and reception*", reinserts history into the study of genre which has traditionally been lacking or absent (20). Such strictures have been borne in mind and the empirically grounded criticism presented here draws on production histories and trends, evolving narrative patterns and character types, and cultural and critical assumptions regarding the imaginative treatment of espionage. As well as the films and television dramas, primary sources include production documents, press reports, publicity materials, trade papers and newspaper and magazine reviews. What is attempted here is genre history grounded in the specific evidence of films and their related documents of production and circulation. The method has been termed 'contextual film history', or alternatively 'contextual cinematic histo-

ry', where the emphasis is on locating the "*primary sources to document the processes and external contextual factors that shaped the content of the films*" (Chapman 2013: 95). In its evolutionary phase, the approach tended to rely on the case-study (O'Connor and Jackson 1979), but subsequently the method has been successfully adopted to deal with a national cinema in a historical period (Richards 1984), a prominent series of films (Chapman 1999/2007), and filmmakers (Burton and O'Sullivan 2009).

'Contextual film history' has sometimes been criticised for failing to bring an analytic focus to its object of enquiry, for being insensitive to the aesthetics of the screen, the place of technique and style for example, as well as to the viewer's immediate relationship to the visual experience. In the reverse case, though, an over-indulgence towards the *text* and the theoretical moment of spectatorship fails to take adequate notice of the *context*, how the text came into being for example, in the form that it eventually appeared, or the meaning of the text for contemporary viewers as recorded in reviews and criticism. As I will show, these elements are significant in a consideration of the spy screen in Britain after 1960. A close examination of the press response to the films and television dramas, for example, allows for a diachronic assessment of a cycle as it builds and declines. The press response also provides insights into public attitudes and discussion of controversial themes and figures as they were depicted on screen, a noteworthy characteristic of espionage drama with its spies, traitors, class elements and narratives of betrayal. As Colin MacArthur once observed, journalism, criticism and the critical reception of popular culture embody an "*agenda setting power*", laying out and organising the terms around which texts will be appreciated and understood (1985: 79). As will be shown, important and popular spy dramas such as *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1979), *A Very British Coup* (1988), *Cambridge Spies* (2003) and *Spooks* (2002-11) attracted much comment and generated a critical life beyond the moment of screening.

Where appropriate, the account considers the important ideological aspects of the spy screen, the dominant representational strategies pertaining to class, race, gender, sexuality and empire. However, this has not been the main focus of the study and it is hoped that the detailed survey presented here will tempt and aid future scholars to investigate such significant issues from a much more secure and considered basis. While many of the screen dramas examined here were derived from literary originals, the approach adopted has not specifically considered the process of adaptation, and this is another important area for future research and scholarship. Cultural critic Toby Miller has assessed the spyscreen as an "*under-researched but over-popular genre*" (2003: 170). The following study of the British spyscreen since 1960 aims to bring greater equilibrium to that unbalanced arrangement.

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