

The Language and Genealogy of Early Spy Cinema

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THE LANGUAGE AND GENEALOGY OF EARLY SPY CINEMA: 1919-1959

Abstract

The following paper is a genre-specific study of early spy cinema that traces the language and genealogy of the genre from its conception to its modernity, in the films of Hitchcock, Reed, Wilder, Huston, and Fuller. Focusing on American and German film tradition, this paper examines espionage cinema from 1919-1959. The origins of the hero are briefly examined through a historical framework that traces his lineage and literary sources of influence to: epic poetry and Byronism, mythology, folklore, legend, oral tradition and early espionage literature. The impetus of this study is the representational and ideological analysis of several recurring motifs - or signifiers - within the spy genre, namely: (a) the domesticated spy-agent, (b) the active investigator and passive detective as spy, (c) the fugitive spy, or agent in flight, (d) the double agent or domestic informer, and (e) the fated female agent. The scholarly research and theoretical framework upon which this paper is grounded references the works of: Kingsley Amis, Alan Booth, Wesley Britton, Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, Michael Denning, Ian Fleming, Bruce Merry, Toby Miller, John Pearson, David Trotter, Wesley Wark, and Robin Wood.

Introduction: A Brief History

Published in 1953 by renowned British novelist Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale* introduced the modern literary world to Bondian espionage fiction, thereafter influencing a series of films that continue to remain a mainstay in the canon of spy cinema for nearly half a century. The novelette, which the author describes as, "a sort of thriller thing," shapes far more than the milieu of literary fiction (xv). In *The Life of Ian Fleming*, biographer John Pearson places *Casino Royale* "in a class by itself among thrillers and adventure stories" (191). In January 1952, Fleming penned the brash and gritty world of British secret agent James Bond with the following lines:

The scent and smoke and sweat of a casino are nauseating at three in the morning. Then the soul-erosion produced by high gambling - a compost of greed and fear and nervous tension - becomes unbearable, and the senses awake and revolt from it. James Bond suddenly knew that he was tired. (9)

The espionage genre does, however, predate contemporary Bondian fiction. In *The Anatomy of the Spy Thriller*, Bruce Merry explores the infinite lineage of espionage to the classic epics of Greek mythology, namely the Spartan siege of Troy, an impenetrable city-fortress that is sacked by a ruthless military leader. Merry proposes that "epic poetry presented its audience with a hero who performed a series of quests or underwent a cycle of adventures and faced recurrent challenges" (218):

The classical champions pour libations, enlist the aid of gods, clothe themselves in special armour, connive with informers and cross the enemy lines by night. These germinal situations develop into canonical features of the modern spy plot. (3)

In the introduction to Fleming's book, Paul Gallico points out that, "the removal of monsters by violence, where nothing else would prevail" remains a recurrent historical theme in literature and film (viii). Many stories follow a similar formula of defeating an evil monster and the triumph of good over all forms of adversity or malevolence, namely: Perseus, Christ, David (and Goliath), St. Paul, Beowulf, King Arthur, Joan of Arc, Gandalf the Grey, Dracula, and Frankenstein. As Wesley Britton explains in *Beyond Bond: Spies in Fiction and Film*, Biblical texts preach the same fundamental themes, quoting Ephesians 6:12: "'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places'" (71). The primordial struggle between good and evil instigates the evolutionary existence of conflict, fostering both protagonist and antagonist in the Hollywood tradition.

From a socio-cultural perspective, folklore and legend retain similar motifs. Merry concedes that "the *schema* of the spy narrative is also shown to have a marked correspondence with the main mythic functions of the folktale" (7). In the old Polish story of the Dragon of Wawel, a fire-breathing dragon pillages a nearby Krakow countryside. The king announces that whomsoever defeats the dragon shall receive his daughter's hand in marriage. A young and cunning stable boy - a modern day St. George - forges a plan, stuffing a fake sheep with gunpowder and feeding it to the beast. He defeats the dragon, saves the townspeople and is rewarded with certain beauty. "The immense appeal of the spy figure in modern literature is partly due to the fact that he has subverted the place of the folk hero" and replaced him with a modern day man of action (221). In *The James Bond Dossier*, Kingsley Amis observes that Fleming's secret agent personifies the romantic Byronic hero:

[Bond] is lonely, melancholy, of fine natural physique which has become in some way ravaged, of similarly fine but ravaged countenance, dark and brooding in expression, of a cold or cynical veneer, above all 'enigmatic,' in possession of a sinister secret. (36)

"The spy is one of many cyclical romantic figures in literary composition. He may be in turns bandit, detective, criminal, hunted man, sheriff, lone ranger, explorer or *parfit gentil*," represented in both literature and on film by such figures as: Robin Hood, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Judas Iscariot, Tarzan the ape man, Achilles, Davy Crockett, The Ringo Kid, J. R. R. Tolkien's Aragorn, Huckleberry Finn, Robinson Crusoe, Lawrence (of Arabia), and Jay Gatsby (Merry 7). Modern cinema identifies several roles of the spy, who may be, but is not exclusive to: an agent, operative or investigator, enemy alien, mole, conspirator, fugitive, traitor or assassin. Spy films have evolved from early cloak-and-dagger stories and propose more complex definitions of good and evil.

Inclusive of the spy-thriller and the espionage or secret agent film, modern spy films have several sources of influence from the "dime novel" to the noir narratives of the 1940s and 1950s. However influential, the espionage genre is not solely dependant on literary fiction with arguably no definitive correlation between fiction writing and the modern spy film, insomuch as saying that the novel came first and the films simply followed. The development of spy cinema is largely founded on the progression of causal agents, themes and motifs throughout German and American cinema. The genealogy of early spy cinema (1919-1959) is representative of several recurring motifs: (a) the domesticated agent/spy, (b) the active investigator and passive detective as spy, (c) the fugitive spy, or agent in flight, (d) the double agent or domestic informer, and (e) the fated female agent.

The domesticated spy is as much an agent of the home as he is of the world outside of the home, a figure of middle-class society that both threatens and reaffirms the values of family life. The active investigator and passive detective are agents of subversion, instigated by professional and personal duty to expose the truth. Reluctant to be involved in subversive activities, the agent in flight - both fugitive and pursuer - inadvertently becomes part of the world of espionage, at times against his own will. Often conflicted between two opposing loyalties, the double agent infiltrates organizations from within while the domestic informer does so from without. The fated female spy is punished for being agent of secrecy and sexual coercion and is most often fated to perish.

Although it is a finite branch of film studies, the spy genre is irrevocably dependent on film language that fervours a broad discussion about: narrative, character, heroism, film style, mythology, legend, folklore and oral tradition. The breadth of this paper is focused on the language and pre-cursive origins of the spy genre. As early as 1919, many films have contributed to the filmic ancestry of the spy-thriller, a genus of historiography that includes: Fritz Lang's *Die Spinnen* (The Spiders, 1919), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, The Gambler*, 1922) and *Spione* (*Spies*, 1928), George Fitzmaurice's *Mata Hari* (1931), *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, 1933), W. S. Van Dyke's *The Thin Man* (1934), Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1935, 1955), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Sabotage* (1936), *Secret Agent* (1936), and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Saboteur* (1942), *The Ministry of Fear* (1944), *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *Notorious* (1946), Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), *Conspirator* (1949), Billy Wilder's *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943), Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953), *The Man Who Never Was* (1955), *North by Northwest* (1959), and Carol Reed's *Our Man in Havana* (1959).

This paper entertains some examples from literary fiction, however, it does not observe an expansive history of spy or detective novels. Regrettably, much of contemporary academic writing is overwhelmed with critical discussion of spy fiction and film as a unified body of work, saturated with discussions about film's literary predecessors. The following study focuses on the aforementioned films in terms of their generic conventions, style, ideology and inherent symbolism that are faithful to early spy cinema.

Early German Spy Cinema: 1919-1944

Early spy cinema is born in the tradition of 1920s German cinema through the oeuvre of Fritz Lang. After its defeat in the First World War (1914-1918) and failed diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries, the climate of post-war Germany is as Lang himself recalls, "a time of deep despair, hysteria, cynicism, and boundless vice" (*For Example Fritz Lang*). As Toby Miller notes in *Spyscreen: Espionage on Film and TV from the 1930s to the 1960s*, espionage thrillers of this era "focused on the identification and defeat of wrongdoers through participation and exploration, a practical reasoning that ultimately explains irregular, undesirable events" (44). Lang's classic film *Spione* (1928) is the culmination of a prophetic body of work that started in 1919. The film traces the embezzlement of sensitive information, a document ratifying a secret treaty between two Eastern powers. Grieving over the death of her late father and brother, Sonja Barranikowa, an agent for General Director Haghi of the Haghi Bank in Shanghai, falls in love with Secret Service agent No. 326. *Spione* is both referential to early American cinema and a chief precursor to the modern espionage film.

Die Spinnen is one of a series of exploration films that follows a simple premise of adventure. In *The Golden Sea* - the first of two parts - Kay Hoog, an American yachtsman and adventurer, journeys to an ancient Inca city in search of vast fortune. Master Lio Sha is the leader of "The Spiders," a group of underground gangsters and spies who attempt to sabotage Hoog's plans and selfishly claim the treasure for themselves. In part two, *The Diamond Ship*, Hoog travels to a "subterranean Chinese city" in search of the "Buddha-head diamond," a precious stone with supernatural powers. Lang uses the fundamental tropes of early cinema to create a new genre, siding with Miller who believes that "the stock generic components of spy film are suspense, adventure, romance, and humour, played out over repeated problems in the relationship of person to state: loyalty, paranoia, war, and politics" (44).

In the early 1920s, the German state was in abject turmoil and economic crisis, in debt due in large part to wartime spending and reciprocity monies that Germany owed the Allied countries afflicted by The Great War (1914-1918). From a socio-cultural perspective, Lang recalls that in Germany:

Abject poverty coexisted side-by-side with incredible new wealth . . . Dr. Mabuse is the archetype of that era. He's a gambler. He plays cards, he plays roulette, and he plays with the lives of those people, and he plays with death . . . [He is] a Nietzschean superman in the worst sense . . . He wants to destroy this state, and upon its ruins establish his world, the empire of crime. (*For Example Fritz Lang*)

An adaptation of Norbert Jacques' novel, *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler* explores the subject of criminal activity and the gross accumulation of personal wealth. Having compromised a "secret trade agreement between Holland and Switzerland," Dr. Mabuse, a scientist and criminal genius, fixes the German stock exchange and uses hypnosis as a means to win at cards (*Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*). The character of the deranged doctor reappears in Lang's 1933 film *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. In his last will and testament, the evil doctor drafts "The Empire of Crime," a document that outlines a counterfeit money ring, an "ingenious jewellery heist," and other premeditated acts of evil and terrorism (*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*).

Based on a story by Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* is a trilling story of secrecy and deceit. A network of agents called "The Ministry of Fear" use hypnosis as a means of torture and mind control. During war-torn England, Stephen Neale is released from Lembridge Asylum after two years for the suspected murder of his terminally ill wife. Several subtle visual motifs of alien or enemy subordination appear throughout the film: a sign on the street wall reads, "Warning: Be On Your Guard," and the London underground warns passengers, "Don't Help The Enemy!" (*The Ministry of Fear*). Hidden inside an infamous tortoise is a canister of microfilm, on which is found "the new embarkation plans" for the British Channel minefields (*The Ministry of Fear*). After the bombardment of a train, Stephen acquires a gun from among the rubble, but like other later secret agent figures finds no use for it throughout the film. Willi Hilfe, a native Austrian,

admits that he is "an alien," foreshadowing his inevitable downfall at the end of the picture (*The Ministry of Fear*). Dispelling fear and paranoia, the film naturalizes the spy to the common people: the doctor, tailor, teacher, artist, and neighbourhood bookkeeper are all agents of suspicion.

The Domesticated Spy/Agent

In the early part of the Thirties, Hollywood's studios become fully integrated, capitalizing on formulaic generic and narrative conventions. The principal causal agent of films created during this period is that of the individual character. During the dawn of the Great Depression, both men and women become domesticated to life within the home. In his book *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence*, Wesley Wark argues that "against a contemporary historical setting of the depression and the rise of class strife . . . the genre escaped from its clutches and embraced a more complex landscape of domestic politics" (5). This social climate and forceful domestication is reflected throughout spy cinema.

In Van Dyke's 1934 film *The Thin Man*, the character of the secret agent becomes entirely domesticated. "The American agent is usually more or less involved with the trappings of everyday life: cars, house, parties with other suburban couples, preceded by love, engagement, marriage and a family" (Merry 31). Nick Charles is a "suave, smooth super-sleuth," a retired detective and criminologist who is persuaded to take one last case. A married man with a wife, a home and a dog, Charles feminizes the character of the spy, entertaining guests in his home while serving cocktails, highballs and martinis. Introduced to us at a social event, Nick is even seen describing to a bartender the proper method for shaking a martini: "You see, the important thing is the rhythm, always have rhythm in your shaking. Now, a Manhattan you shake to fox-trot time. A Bronx, to two-step time. The dry martini you always shake to waltz time" (*The Thin Man*). In this comedic spy-melodrama, "The espionage narrative fosters paranoia feelings and depicts cultivated heroes with ancillary skills and plans for retirement" (3).

Moreover, Nick and his wife Nora may be compared to the literary figures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, a symbolically marital pair of detectives. At the film's conclusion Nick discovers the identity of the assassin and entertains his hypothesis at a dinner party, inviting all of the possible suspects. A successful film series follows from 1935 to 1944s that is modelled on the same reoccurring characters: *After the Thin Man* (1936), *Another Thin Man* (1939), *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941) and 1944's *The Thin Man Goes Home*.

The male spy is further domesticated in *Secret Agent* through a convenient love affair between two allied agents. Novelist and soldier, Richard Ashenden is sent to Switzerland to track down a German enemy spy headed for Constantinople. Before being sent on his mission, his bureau symbolically castrates Ashenden, sending him a telegram that reads: "I'm making you a married man just to round off your new character. Your wife comes a fighting stock. A regular little fire eater, in fact" (*Secret Agent*). Arguing to the General (Peter Lorre), he discredits the idea of a frugal love affair with his colleague, Elsa Carrington: "This girl has been issued to me as part of my disguise . . . She's nothing to me, I tell you, and I'm nothing to her" (*Secret Agent*). As proposed in his essay, "The Development of the Espionage Film," Alan R. Booth holds that *Secret Agent* is "distinctly anti-espionage and pacifist in tone: Gielgud killed the wrong man, and both he and Carroll, lovers at the end, vowed never to spy again" (142).

Hitchcock's *Sabotage* symbolizes the complete dissolution and estrangement of the nuclear family. Based on *The Secret Agent* - a story by Polish-born novelist Joseph Conrad - the film follows Mr. Verloc, a German enemy agent living in pre-war London who owns and operates a small movie palace called The Bijou Theatre. His wife Winnie is an American who learns of her husband's coercive activities from Detective Sergeant Ted Spencer, the neighbourhood grocer and friendly detective from Scotland Yard. Verloc is a dormant villain who terrorizes London with bombings. He is murdered by his own wife, who is left widowed shortly after her younger brother Stevie dies carrying a package that prematurely explodes while on the tram. *Sabotage* transposes the evils of the criminal underworld into the domestic sphere, threatening the very politics and cohesion of the family unit.

"The American spy thriller has injected emotional interest into the fictional intelligence operation and firmly re-established marriage at the centre of the secret agent's life" (Merry 41). Victor Saville's 1949 spy-melodrama *Conspirator* is the story of Major Michael Curragh, a "bitterly lonely" man who falls in love with Melinda Greyton (Elizabeth Taylor), a young American woman. Concealing secretive information

between one-pound British banknotes, Curragh smuggles "the basic details of the Anglo-American military coordination plan" to the Soviets (*Conspirator*). Curragh has skewed political sympathies while his wife - the typical frontierswoman - claims, "I haven't got a whole political attitude" (*Conspirator*). Greyton is the typical stay-at-home wife, growing suspicious yet remaining unaware of her husband's coercive activities. Curragh's morals remain ambiguous after a failed attempt to murder his wife. Fearful of being discovered by the authorities, Curragh kills himself at the end of the film. Unable to reconcile the home with his profession, the domesticated agent threatens the entire dissolution of the family.

While *Sabotage* and *The Conspirator* seek to dissolve the family, *Our Man in Havana* endeavours its reconciliation. The social vacuity of the Cold War period "diminished 'the comprehensive craft of intelligence' to romantic individualism" (Miller 38). Set in pre-revolutionary Latin America, Reed's *Our Man in Havana* is an adaptation of British writer and novelist Graham Green's book of the same title. It is the story of Jim Wormold (Alec Guinness), a single father and vacuum cleaner salesman turned impromptu spy who fools the British Secret Service by falsifying a network of agents that includes a professor, an engineer, a pilot, and a young female dancer at the Shanghai Theatre. "The paranoid preoccupation of the double agent is here recycled into the more entertaining anguish of the 'zero-agent' . . . who is obliged to maintain a constant pretence that he is a valid spy" (Merry 153).

Our Man in Havana absolves issues of formidable social importance to the microcosm of the - albeit unconventional - American family. In his speech at the vacuum cleaner convention, Wormold compares war and conflict to the relationship between two competing merchants:

We hear a lot nowadays about the Cold War. But any trader will tell you that the war between two manufacturers can be quite a hot war. Take 'Fastcleaners' and 'Nuclears' for instance. There's no fundamental difference between the two machines any more than there is between two human beings. There'd be very little competition and certainly no war if it wasn't for the ambition of a few men. (*Our Man in Havana*)

Wormold ceases to be an "old-fashioned merchant" and assumes his fabricated fantasy, reinforcing the fable of a secret agent and killing his pursuer at the end of the film (*Our Man in Havana*). "Unambiguous anti-espionage" becomes the underlying theme of Reed's film, permeating the foundation of the family and the domesticated father figure (Booth 149).

The Active Investigator/Passive Detective

Spy cinema is profoundly influenced by film noir; however, throughout the genre and its seemingly endless list of hard-boiled personae there exists an inherent dichotomy between two figures: (i) the active investigator, and (ii) the passive detective. The investigator-detective spy is a man - or a female in some cases - of action or passive inaction who finds himself in a situation beyond his own political or social control. He is a truth-seeker, gathering secretive or covert information from his enemies behind the guise of an investigator-detective. In *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller*, Michael Denning identifies a division between two distinctive typologies - "an opposition between the amateur spies . . . and the later professional spies" (52). The active investigator, or unsanctioned "gentleman outlaw," is an amateur sleuth, a fundamentally apolitical figure in search of truth and personal solace (55). The detective is a pivotal agent of justice, a paid professional who solves crimes and captures criminals. He is a passive onlooker who, at the outset, carries out his role as an external responsibility. In his essay, "The Politics of Adventure in the Early British Spy Novel," David Trotter notes that the amateur agent is "in some way unstable at the outset, but grounded and strengthened by adventure [whereas] . . . the professional agent is already secure both in his expertise and in his political commitment" (42).

John Huston's directorial debut, *The Maltese Falcon* is regarded as perhaps the quintessential Hollywood film noir detective story and introduces the figure of the passive detective-spy. The opening scrolling text prefaces the story, an adventurous pretext for present day events:

In 1539, the Knight Templars of Malta, paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, by sending him a Golden Falcon encrusted from beak to claw with rarest jewels - but pirates seized the galley carrying this priceless token and the fate of the Maltese Falcon remains a mystery to this day. (*The Maltese Falcon*)

The year is c. 1940, San Francisco, California. Coerced into a murder story by a mysterious woman, the film follows Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart), a private detective who becomes part of a plot to uncover a lost artifact - an inanimate black statuette of a bird - from competing collectors. Sam is a symbolic gun for hire, a "cheap gunman" that refuses to use and seemingly has no need for any weapon whatsoever; on several occasions he defeats his assailants barehanded. Through brute force and violence, the detective disarms Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) by hand, knocking the man unconscious inside his office (*The Maltese Falcon*). Unique to the garb of a private detective, his accoutrement is simple and stylish, wearing only a simple black suit and hat. Sam relies on the reliable exchange of money. He does not work for Queen or country, and has no outside interests in the black ornament outside of his investigation. Sam even refuses to do business with Kasper "the fat man" Gutman, the only person who knows the bird's true value.

Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1935) introduces a protagonist estranged from his own world who becomes an active investigator-spy in the criminal underworld. Comparable to *The 39 Steps* and *North by Northwest*, this film is representative of what Denning describes as "innocents abroad," that is "an educated, middle-class man . . . travelling for business or pleasure on the Continent who accidentally gets caught up in a low and sinister game . . . of spies, informers, and thugs" (67). Lawrence and his wife Jill are on holiday in Switzerland when their daughter Betty is kidnapped. In the 1955 remake of the same title, Dr. Benjamin McKenna (Jimmy Stewart) is a surgeon by vocation and is by no means a professional detective. Before Louie Bernard's death in the Marrakech marketplace, the French spy and agent of the Deuxième Bureau entrusts Ben with secret plans to assassinate a British statesman. Much like Edward Drayton, the kidnapper who disguises himself as a priest, Ben affirms the British proverb of being a "wolf in sheep's clothing," assuming the role of an amateur investigator who is instigated to actively pursue his son's kidnappers (*The Man Who Knew Too Much*).

The Fugitive Spy or Agent in Flight

The 39 Steps is representative of several films of the mid-1930s that are symptomatically fearful of war and motivated by an agent in flight or fugitive spy (Booth 142). Former essayist for the *Cahiers du cinéma* during the 1950s and author of *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Robin Wood argues that *The 39 Steps* "belongs to the 'picaresque': an apparently inconsequential assemblage of episodes . . . whose common link is simply that each constitutes a further 'adventure' for the protagonist" (275). At the outset of the film Richard Hannay, a Canadian tourist, meets Annabella, a mysterious woman who is being pursued by assassins. After her murder Hannay learns that Annabella is actually a secret agent who is following a brilliant spy from a foreign power.

An adaptation of John Buchan's 1915 book, *The 39 Steps* follows a story of divulging secret government information to foreign agents. The antagonists that chase Hannay remain obscure and ambiguous: "The 39 Steps . . . [is an] organization of spies, collecting information on behalf" of a foreign government office that entrusts "secrets vital to [England's] air defence" to Mr. Memory, a lounge performer who commits the plans to memory and then exports them overseas (*The 39 Steps*). Hannay picks up Annabella's trail and becomes a target himself. Like a common criminal, Hannay is "isolated on every side, chased by the London police for a murder he did not commit, and both pursuer of and fugitive from the secret agents of the 39 steps" (Booth 141).

Hannay is the cinematic descendant of Gilbert Martin (Henry Fonda), a character who must escape the Natives that threaten his survival in John Ford's 1939 film *Drums Along the Mohawk*. Buchan "never forgets that Hannay is a frontiersman, and that frontiersmen are forever excluded from the political system" (Trotter 52). Hannay and his female accomplice, Margaret, are forced to flee from Scotland Yard detectives while unravelling the secrets of the spy organization, only to be revealed in the final scene as Mr. Memory dies, eagerly divulging the secret formula. As both hero and frontiersman, Hannay "upholds the law without himself being protected or defined by it" (52).

North by Northwest takes the protagonist on an adventure across America, ending in the foothills of Mount Rushmore. A bachelor and New York advertising man, Roger O. Thornhill (Cary Grant) stumbles into the world of secret intelligence when he is mistaken for George Kaplan, a decoy agent of the American Intelligence Agency. Wood believes that Thornhill represents the "falsely accused man" who enters the world of espionage quite reluctantly (241). Under the pseudonym of George Kaplan, he attempts to rescue his love interest from

harm. Thornhill is a hunted man trying to convince a woman he does not know - a complete stranger - to fall in love with him. "In the midst of this he stands, an isolated speck with the whole worlds against him, absolutely exposed and vulnerable: modern man deprived of all his amenities and artificial resources" (137).

In the science-fiction genre "*suspension of disbelief*" positions the "solitary hero pitted against enormous odds," threatening his own primordial survival, as is the case in Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950) and Don Siegel's 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Merry 62). Grant represents the invincibility of the secret agent - a biplane attempts to gun down Roger in a cornfield; he even manages to fend off his kidnappers and escape their custody while heavily intoxicated. The story mirrors, if not mimics, *The 39 Steps*. The fugitive sequence "reprise[s] Hannay's flight across the Scottish moors and fleeting sanctuary with the rough farmer and his repressed wife" (Booth 147). Boundless and in constant flight, the hero figure is also a facsimile of Hannay:

Grant, the ordinary man suddenly thrust into extraordinary circumstances, forced to flee from both spies and police (from a murder he has not committed); his encounter with a beautiful blonde (Eva Marie Saint) on a train; his attention-getting performance among an unsuspecting audience; the shooting which did not kill him." (148)

Saboteur confronts anti-American ideals of prejudicially convicting an innocent man of a crime he did not commit. True value is placed on the acquisition of social power and profiteering by any means necessary, a distorted philosophy based on the American dream and, as Charles Tobin describes, the inalienable "rights of man" (*Saboteur*). This is evident at the charity ball when guests are asked to bid blindly on one of Mrs. Henrietta Sutton's diamond bracelets without knowing its true value or authenticity. Barry Kane, an aircraft factory employee, is framed for the death of his best friend Kenneth Mason. Barry's intuition leads him to suspect Frank Frye is the culprit behind this crime, who is as Kane describes, "a saboteur who doesn't mind killing Americans for money," attempting to bomb the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The only character that offers a clairvoyant opinion is Phillip Martin, a blind man who stands up for Barry in front of his niece Patricia Martin; she claims that it is her moral obligation to hand the fugitive over to the authorities. In the end it is Lady Liberty that decides the fate of the true antagonist, sending Frye to his eventful death.

The Double Agent or Domestic Informer

The socio-political climate of post-World War II America (1945-1959) is one of widespread fear and paranoia. The nation is under scrutiny and vigilant observation both from within and without. Denning claims that, "The spy novel is in a sense the war novel of the Cold War, the cover story of an era of decolonization" (92). Throughout the genre, the character of the informer or "Red" agent is synonymous with the threat of Communist invasion and is perceived as fundamentally unpatriotic and anti-American. Based on a story by Dwight Taylor, *Pickup on South Street* is "the case history of a pickpocket" and a model of the double-agent or domestic informer.

Pickup follows a plot to recover secret government microfilm that contains "a new patent for a chemical formula," and the transfer of military information in an attempt to keep it from falling into unfriendly hands. Richard Widmark plays Skip McCoy, a three-time criminal and "two-bit cannon," a lowly vagabond who lives on the New York docks in a run-down and abandoned bait house (*Pickup on South Street*). To the same extent as Sam Spade, or even James Bond, McCoy uses his hands to make a living and does not need a gun to subdue his adversaries. Recommended by Lightning Louie - an underground racketeer - as "the best pickpocket stoolie in the business," Mo (Thelma Ritter) sells Skip out to Captain Dan Tiger for a few dollars, preaching that she was "brought up to report any injustices to the police authorities," complaining still that the cost of living is an excuse for her actions (*Pickup on South Street*).

Skip McCoy and Mo are untrustworthy of authority figures and both willingly choose to live a life of crime. Skip uses his finely manicured hands as a pickpocket artiste, snatching purses and wallets from people on the subway while Mo, a female informer and double-agent, peddles information to the police without remorse. Ultimately, Mo is punished for her betrayal of the criminal underworld of petty racketeering, and is shot by her enemies.

Originally a play by Lajos Biro, *Five Graves to Cairo* is the story of Corporal John J. Bramble, an active British soldier that takes refuge in a vacant desert hotel. To escape his own death and protect the well being

of the other hotel occupants, Bramble assumes the persona of Paul Davos, a former hotel waiter and German agent who dies by enemy fire. Bramble consciously becomes a faux double agent for the German soldiers who are stationed at the hotel. The French hotel maid, a symbolically neutral character between Germany and England, is found "guilty of spreading enemy rumours" and, like Mata Hari, is sentenced to death (*Five Graves to Cairo*).

Adapted from a story by Charles G. Booth, *The House on 92nd Street* is a documentary spy-drama about an American diesel engineer and domestic double agent, Bill Dietrich, who infiltrates a German spy organization and steals sensitive information about "process 97, the secret ingredient of the atomic bomb." Bill is sent to Hamburg and enrolls in "the German high command's notorious school for spies," a secretive "espionage and sabotage service," of the German intelligence branch (*The House on 92nd Street*). The opening voice-over suggests the film's overwhelming message of American imperialism in the midst of war and their advanced knowledge of suspected German agents within the country: "For war is thought, and thought is information, and he who knows the most strikes hardest," an important doctrine for any country involved in the acquisition of enemy intelligence (*The House on 92nd Street*).



Figure 1: Fritz Lang: *Der Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (poster)

The ruined city of post-war Vienna is the setting of Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. Occupied in the aftermath of the Second World War, the city is divided among four separate powers: America, Britain, France and Soviet Russia. Based on another adventure by Graham Greene - a former Communist sympathizer and spy himself - the film tells the story of Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton), a pulp fiction writer who travels to Vienna to meet his good friend and schoolmate Harry Lime (Orson Welles). Upon his arrival, Holly learns that Lime is an influential black-market trader in hiding, "the worst racketeer that ever made a dirty living in this city" and, as Major Galloway reveals, "murder was part of his racket" (*The Third Man*).

The conflict within the film is dependant on the issue of loyalty, a fundamental conflict of interest between Martins and Lime. Martins "peddles myths of the US frontier via popular [Western] novels," while Harry represents "'the classic cinematic adventurer, profiteer and speculator and also, in the context of post-war Vienna, very likely a spy,'" marketing faux pharmaceuticals to the sick and dying (Miller 85). When the two characters meet in person at the fair, Harry makes an effort to defend his actions to his unconvinced friend:

In these days, old man, nobody thinks in terms of human beings. Governments don't, why should we? They talk of the people and the proletariat, and I talk about the suckers and the mugs. It's the same thing. They have their five-year plans and so do I. (*The Third Man*)

The Third Man "remains a major portrayal of national loyalties during the cold war" (Britton 57). Harry's

girlfriend, Anna Schmidt, is without any predisposed allegiance, neither disapproving of Harry's profession nor siding with Holly at the end of the film. Dark and shadowy Vienna creates an environment of political ambiguity and false social responsibility. The city becomes "a microcosm of the incipient Cold War" (Miller 84). As his fingers disappear from under the sewer grate, Lime dies in the underground tunnels like a rat, gunned down by his own informer friend.

Based on a factual WWII account, *The Man Who Never Was* is a story of British counterintelligence and espionage that borrows the same documentary style as *The House on 92nd Street*, released a decade earlier. Lieutenant Commander Ewen Montagu comes up with a plan to infiltrate an advancing German naval front in the Mediterranean by outfitting a cadaver to resemble a fallen British pilot. The body of Major William Martin, a fabricated alias, becomes a symbolic double agent, carrying on his person false tactical military information beyond enemy lines. A German spy is sent to England to authenticate the body, but through the "masterly inactivity" of the British, the enemy front becomes weakened resulting in their retreat out of Sicily. (*The Man Who Never Was*).

The Fated Female Agent

In *The Lady Investigates*, Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan note that it was "during the Golden Age (ca. 1925-1940) that the most formidable women investigators emerged" (13). Comparing her to such chronicled figures as Nancy Drew, a classic and formulaic investigator-heroine of the 1920s-1930s, the female emerges as a detective in literary fiction and as a spy in the cinema. "The girl detective, in her proper historic context, remains a classic feminist symbol - a unique figment of popular culture" (163).

Fitzmaurice's 1931 film *Mata Hari* introduces the prevalent character of the fated or sacrificial female agent. In 1917 Paris, when "war-ridden France dealt summarily with traitors and spies," Mata Hari (Greta Garbo) leads a double life - she is both a Parisian nightclub dancer and a secret agent who bewitches men for information (*Mata Hari*). Dubois, Chief of the French Secret Service, searches relentlessly for proof to put her away. The opening execution scene represents the French people's disdain for foreign spies and foreshadows Mata's foreseeable downfall.



Figure 2: Sir Carol Reed: *The Third Man* (1949)

Mata is considered France's "greatest enemy" and a dangerous female anti-heroine (*Mata Hari*). She refuses frugal and meaningless love, first professing her affection for Lieutenant Alexis Rosanoff - a young pilot in the air force - then refuting it by claiming, "That was last night" (*Mata Hari*). The life of an agent, as described to her by her superior, "is an exacting profession" that rejects all forms of love, friendship and emotion (*Mata Hari*). By not distinguishing her love for Alexis from her professional responsibilities, Mata becomes

a scapegoat for her organization. The French Republic finds her "guilty of espionage and of communicating military information to the enemy," sentencing her to death by military firing squad (*Mata Hari*).

Much like their male protagonist counterparts, female agents most often escape death. In Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), Miss Froy, an elderly music governess, disappears during a suspicious train journey to England. Working as an undercover agent for the British, Froy is en-route to deliver a secret message back home: "It's a tune. It contains, in code of course, the vital clause of a secret pact between two European countries," Froy tells Gilbert (*The Lady Vanishes*). During her travels she is intercepted by an amusing assortment of foreign agents - a surgeon, a nun, an Italian magician and his wife - who disguise her as an ill patient under the care of a doctor on board the train. Thwarting her assailants after an exchange of bullets, Froy escapes unscathed and delivers her communication to England. As with other films of the 1930s, the dissolution of the couple - or family - concedes in death, while the formulation of the couple results in the affirmation of life. In *The Lady Vanishes* Iris Henderson ultimately decides to leave her fiancé and unites with Gilbert.

Wood argues that "Hitchcock's films imply a male spectatorship, and that the only position they offer women is . . . that of a more overly masochistic complicity in guilt and punishment" (362). In *Notorious* Cary Grant plays T. R. Devlin, an American undercover agent who is assigned to recruit Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman), the daughter of a convicted German worker, for intelligence service. In the film, Alicia is even compared to Mata Hari, a woman who "makes love for the papers" and brashly gives herself to numerous men (*Notorious*). Her sexual prowess aside, Alicia is a patriotic American and refuses, on several attempts, to sell herself as a stoolpigeon to the authorities. After taking on her assignment, she marries Alexander Sebastian as a cover. Discrediting her as the typical married and committed domesticated spy, she is by no means a faithful wife and continues to pursue Devlin, while barely escaping her own death.

Conclusion

The model for modern spy cinema predates contemporary generic forms and formulas. The Bondian model is a direct ancestor of an entire genus of films based on recurring causal agents, motifs, romantic literary characters and heroes, folklore and legend. Dating from 1919-1959, early spy cinema is founded on a number of motifs that both define and transform the role of the secret agent or spy, depicted throughout the American and German film tradition. The films of Fritz Lang are exploratory thrillers, adventure stories with simple premises, namely crime, personal wealth, secrecy and deceit.

The character of the secret agent becomes domesticated throughout the serial films of the 1930s. The microcosm of home, in marriage and opportune love, is at the centre of this movement, both dissolving and fostering the reconciliation of the family. The films of the 1940s-1950s present two dichotomous characters: the active investigator-spy - an amateur, unsanctioned and apolitical outlaw who is estranged from his own world - and the passive detective-spy - a professional agent of justice that is both passive and morally responsible. The fugitive spy, or agent in flight, belongs to a frugal plot of escape and adventure. Frontiersman and hunted man, fugitive and pursuer, the agent must escape the grasp of his enemies who threaten his own primordial survival and natural rights and pursue the truthful revelation of a secretive plot. The double agent or domestic informer arise in the postwar (1945-1959) climate of widespread paranoia and is concerned with the theft or acquisition of sensitive government information. The fated female agent emerges as an investigator who endures foreseeable punishment, predestined to perish or nearly escape death. The lineage of early spy cinema is a direct descendant of the German and American film tradition. The secret agent film is credited with a number of recurring signifiers and archetypal character, thereby proliferating its influence beyond simple commodity thrillers.

[This text is based on the author's Honours BA thesis.]

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Figure 3: Greta Garbo and Ramon Novarro in George Fitzmaurice's *Mata Hari* (1931)

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