

# **The Development of the British Conspiracy Thriller 1980-1990**

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## *Abstract*

This thesis adopts a cross-disciplinary approach to explore the development of the conspiracy thriller genre in British cinema during the 1980s. There is considerable academic interest in the Hollywood conspiracy cycle that emerged in America during the 1970s. Films such as *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1975) and *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976) are indicative of the genre, and sought to reflect public anxieties about perceived government misdeeds and misconduct within the security services. In Europe during the same period, directors Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi were exploring similar themes of state corruption and conspiracy in films such as *State of Siege* (1972) and *Illustrious Corpses* (1976). This thesis provides a comprehensive account of how a similar conspiracy cycle emerged in Britain in the following decade. We will examine the ways in which British film-makers used the conspiracy form to reflect public concerns about issues of defence and national security, and questioned the measures adopted by the British government and the intelligence community to combat Soviet subversion during the last decade of the Cold War.

Unlike other research exploring espionage in British film and television, this research is concerned exclusively with the development of the conspiracy thriller genre in mainstream cinema. This has been achieved using three case studies: *Defence of the Realm* (Drury, 1986), *The Whistle Blower* (Langton, 1987) and *The Fourth Protocol* (MacKenzie, 1987). For each case study chapter, interviews have been conducted with the film-makers in order to gain insight into the aims and motivations that underpin each film. As well as employing these first-hand accounts of the production contexts, close analysis of film style is provided in order to understand the ways in which the British genre is informed stylistically by its Hollywood and European forebears. This means that for the first time, the British conspiracy cycle can be understood within a wider historical and cinematic context.

Detractors of the conspiracy genre argue that it offers audiences a simplistic view of complex political events. We will reflect on this criticism and evaluate the extent to which the British films provide meaningful political comment within the conventions of mainstream cinema.

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## Introduction

In exploring the development of the British conspiracy thriller genre in mainstream cinema, the first aim of this research is to understand the ways in which it was influenced by three sources: the Hollywood conspiracy cycle of the 1970s, the European conspiracy thrillers of the late 1960s and 1970s, and the novels of John le Carré. The thesis begins by examining each of these sources in turn. Specifically, we will explore the cultural context from which these texts emerged, and how the theme of conspiracy is presented in each. Thereafter, we arrive at the second and most important aim of the thesis: three British film case studies are examined in order to understand how British film-makers used the conspiracy form as means of responding to the political climate of the mid-1980s. The British case studies are: *Defence of the Realm* (Drury, 1985), *The Whistle Blower* (Langton, 1986) and *The Fourth Protocol* (MacKenzie, 1987). These films are indicative of the British conspiracy form, and foreground a clear message: the British security services adopted unethical methods under the auspices of the Conservative government, in order to combat perceived Soviet subversion during the last decade of the Cold War.

This research is unique because it is the first comprehensive study of the British conspiracy cycle in mainstream cinema, which has hitherto been overlooked by film scholars and cultural historians. Furthermore, to date, no academic study has sought to understand the British conspiracy cycle in relation to the European and American forms of the genre: for the first time, meaningful links will be drawn between the Hollywood, European and British styles of conspiracy, in order to appreciate the British cycle within a wider historical and filmic context.

This introduction will provide a review of the literature relevant to the research and thereafter explains the methodology underpinning the research process. However, before exploring these areas, it is perhaps useful to define the term conspiracy thriller.

Conspiracy thriller narratives present a David and Goliath struggle between an individual and the state; the insurmountable odds faced by an ocnophobic protagonist, or ‘hater of

thrills'.<sup>1</sup> Michael Balints identifies this kind of protagonist as a recurring feature in suspense narratives in general: the ocnophobic protagonist is an unwilling or unwitting hero forced to confront a dilemma in which familiar situations are replaced or become unfamiliar and threatening.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist is an empathetic everyman, whose journey of discovery results in *anagnorisis*: a moment of critical discovery of an unethical plot by the antagonist. In contrast, the antagonist in the conspiracy thriller is enigmatic and impenetrable; almost always a large corporation or state department. It is normal for conspiracy thriller narratives to conclude with the nefarious plot being thwarted by the ocnophobic protagonist. However, this successful resolution is mitigated either by the demise of the protagonist, or by an irredeemable reversal of their fortune. Such narratives usually include an epilogue which suggests that the conspiracy will re-emerge. The enduring message of the conspiracy thriller is that the antagonist is ultimately more enduring than the power of individual agency.

In 1979 media specialist Jerry Palmer defined the conspiracy thrillers as 'negative thrillers', and their negative quality is an important clue to understanding the ways in which the conspiracy form works. Conspiracy thrillers are negative in two respects: they eschew the convention in popular cinema of a positive resolution, with the adoption of a down-beat, fatalistic conclusion. Furthermore, the conspiracy thrillers present a pessimistic message about the political landscape that is intended to reflect the wider public mood.<sup>3</sup> Palmer's study of the thriller genre adopts a structuralist approach, but his research is very broad in its application of the term 'thriller'. Palmer's work is best considered as taxonomy of the thriller genre in its broadest sense, and while it is helpful in gaining an understanding of the generic features of thrillers, it does not explore the subtle variations and nuances found within the genre, including the structural features specific to conspiracy narratives.

Steve Neale's much more recent study of genres in mainstream cinema reminds us that a broader understanding of genre is required than that which Palmer provides. According

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<sup>1</sup> Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood* USA: Routledge, 2000. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, J. *Thrillers* UK: Macmillan, 1979. 40.

to Neale, the thriller genre has become prone to ‘hybridizing’, making it difficult to assign it a fixed set of characteristics.<sup>4</sup> My research acknowledges the notion of hybridization and highlights both the similarities and differences between the Hollywood, European and British versions of the conspiracy genre. For example, according to Richard Dorfman, whose research traces the development of the Hollywood cycle, the American conspiracy thriller emerged from *film noir*. However, the British conspiracy cycle is influenced not only by the American films, but also, uniquely, by the type of literary British espionage thriller which emerged in the 1960s penned by authors such as John le Carré. Rather than attempting to assign films the straightjacket of conformity to a fixed genre, this thesis acknowledges variations within the conspiracy cycles of America, Europe and Britain. Indeed, these variations are worthy of scholarly discussion because they lead us to a much deeper understanding about the films’ wide-ranging and differing cultural and historical contexts. The conspiracy films are political thrillers, and the hybridization of the conspiracy genre is, in part, attributable to the differing political contexts from which the films emerged, as this thesis will demonstrate.

A narrower analysis of the thriller genre than that offered by Palmer is required. Cawelti and Rosenberg’s 1989 book, *The Spy Story*, focusses on the variations that exist across a range of espionage narratives in particular.<sup>5</sup> It is within the espionage genre that we find the roots of the British conspiracy thriller. Defining espionage narratives as stories with a ‘protagonist that has some primary connection with espionage,’ Cawelti and Rosenberg provide analysis of variations within the espionage genre.<sup>6</sup> Michael Denning’s *Cover Stories* is also interested in the way in which the espionage thriller has developed, and Denning focusses on prominent authors including Ambler, Buchan, Fleming and le Carré. Denning is primarily concerned with the ways in which spy narratives have been used by writers as a means of exploring social and political concerns throughout the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> This aspect of Denning’s work is important here, because it focusses on understanding the British conspiracy thrillers in relation to their historical context. With this historical approach in mind, the collection of essays assembled in 1991 by the

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<sup>4</sup> Neale, 2000. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Cawelti, J. & Rosenberg, B. *The Spy Story* USA: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Denning, M. *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

historian Wesley K. Wark in *Spy Fiction, Spy Film and Real Intelligence* are valuable in establishing the extent to which espionage narratives since the nineteenth century have held a mirror up to contemporary political events. From Wark's collection, Dennis Smyth's 'Our Man in Havana, Their Man in Madrid: Literary Invention in Literary Fact and Fiction', as well as Alan R. Booth's 'The Development of the Espionage Film', are particularly pertinent because both essays contain analysis of espionage thrillers produced during the Cold War; the spy thrillers of that period were particularly influential on the style of the British conspiracy thrillers.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the British conspiracy thriller, much has been written about the Hollywood conspiracy cycle that was a response to the tumultuous political events in America during the 1970s. Film journalist Richard Dorfman believes that the Hollywood conspiracy films reflected 'collective fears about the modern totalitarian state and depicted the government itself as the source of conspiracy'.<sup>9</sup> Dorfman's 1980 article for the *Journal of Popular Film* is useful in establishing the roots of the modern conspiracy thriller, as well as identifying the themes that would be developed in all forms of the conspiracy thriller genre. More useful still is Ryan and Kellner's 1990 publication, *Camera Politica*. In it, the authors provide us with a comprehensive study of how 1970s and 1980s mainstream Hollywood film was used by film-makers as a means of communicating political thought, 'To study films of this era,' they believe 'is to study a culture in decline'.<sup>10</sup> *Camera Politica* identifies the ways in which political ideas are conveyed through form as much as through narrative content; how cinematography, lighting and editing have been used as a means of communicating political ideas. This method of analysis is applied to a wide range of what Ryan and Kellner call 'crisis films', including the Hollywood conspiracy thrillers *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1975) and *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976). *Camera Politica* explains that the conspiracy thrillers were intended by film-makers to be 'metaphors of fear', reflecting the mood of a disenfranchised American

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<sup>8</sup> Smyth, D. 'Our Man in Havana, Their Man in Madrid: Literary Invention in Literary Fact and Fiction' *Spy Film, Spy Fiction and Real Intelligence* Wark, W. (ed.). UK: Routledge, 1991. 115-136

Booth, A.R. 'The Development of the Espionage Film' *Spy Film, Spy Fiction and Real Intelligence*. Wark, W. (Ed.). UK: Routledge, 1991. 136-160.

<sup>9</sup> Dorfman, R. 'Conspiracy City' *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7, no.4 (1980): 434-56

<sup>10</sup> Ryan, M. & Kellner, D. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* USA: Indiana University Press, 1988. 7.

public. Ryan and Kellner's method of combining historical context with textual analysis enables a deeper understanding of such films, and their approach also benefits the study of the British conspiracy case studies.

Eighteen mainstream Hollywood films which are justifiably termed conspiracy thrillers were released between 1970 and 1979. Almost half that number was produced between 1974 and 1976, a period acknowledged by scholars to represent the zenith of the American conspiracy cycle. That two year period saw mainstream thrillers reflecting the public interest generated by Cold War confrontation, political assassination, war and political scandal.<sup>11</sup> However, it should be noted that academic consideration of the conspiracy form was established in America before the 1970s. Historian Richard Hofstadter's influential essay for *Harper's* magazine published in November 1964 and entitled 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', drew attention to the sense of obsessive suspicion that was emerging in the American political arena. Academic interest in conspiracy has not abated in the United States, with many scholars researching how the themes of paranoia and conspiracy have continued to develop in popular film and television.

American literary scholar Timothy Melley believes that while conspiracy is a marginal form, it's 'ubiquity suggests something deeper' about the society in which it originates.<sup>12</sup> Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy*, written in 2000, argues that what underpins the use of the conspiracy form in American culture is a crisis in the United States which reflects a widespread feeling of loss of individual autonomy. Melley's research has been helpful in establishing the ways in which the conspiracy form reflects commonly-held fears about systems of social control and the power of the government and large corporations; these same fears and anxieties underpin the conspiracy thriller in all its forms, including the European and British texts. Film scholar Ray Pratt reached similar conclusions in 2001, but unlike Melley, Pratt's *Projecting Paranoia* focusses exclusively on mainstream American

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<sup>11</sup> Based on information gained from Trifonova, T. 'Agency in the Cinematic Conspiracy Thriller' *SubStance* Vol.41. No.3, 2012. 109-126. Wark, W. *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence* UK: Routledge, 1991; <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_conspiracy-thriller\\_films\\_and\\_television\\_series#Films](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy-thriller_films_and_television_series#Films)>; <<http://www.imdb.com/search/keyword?keywords=political-conspiracy>>

<sup>12</sup> Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* USA: Cornell University Press, 2000. vii.

television and film, avoiding a consideration of conspiracy in literature.<sup>13</sup> More recently, American academics such as Gordon B. Arnold (2008) and William Barna Donovan (2011) have developed the research in this field, exploring how the theme of conspiracy continues to reflect a sense of public disquiet about various forms of American officialdom.<sup>14</sup>

In Europe during the late 1960s and 1970s, directors Constantine Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi were exploring similar themes of state corruption and conspiracy in films including *Z* (1969), *State of Siege* (1972), *The Mattei Affair* (1972) and *Illustrious Corpses* (1976). These films deal with state sponsored assassination, American imperialism, corporate conspiracy and judicial corruption respectively. Once again, these films emerged as responses to the political events of the time, and during the course of this research, academic histories of Europe have been used as a means of gaining an understanding the broader context to the work of the European film-makers. This includes research by historians Tom Buchanan, Christopher Duggan, and Philip Willan.<sup>15</sup> Willan's research from 2002 into the political use of terrorism in Italy during the so-called Years of Lead in the 1970s has been useful in making meaningful links between Francesco Rosi's films and the dominant messages in the American conspiracy cycle; links that remain unexplored by academics. Elsewhere, Mary Wood's research on the Italian conspiracy thriller is in a small minority of work available in the English language about Rosi's films. Wood's 2003 article, 'Revealing the Hidden City', provides valuable analysis of the director's use of setting in Rosi's films.<sup>16</sup> Taking a broadly similar approach to that of Ryan and Kellner's *Camera Politica*, Wood's research offers insight into the ways in which Francesco Rosi films real locations in a way that reinforces the themes of state surveillance and conspiracy, albeit in much less detail than Ryan and Kellner provide for the Hollywood texts.

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<sup>13</sup> Pratt, R. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* USA: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold, G. *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television & Politics* USA: Praeger Publishers, 2008;

Donovan, B.W. *Conspiracy Films* USA: McFarland and Company Inc 2011

Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* USA: Cornell University Press, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Buchanan, T. *Europe's Troubled Peace* UK: Blackwell, 2008.;

Duggan, C. *A Concise History of Italy* UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.;

Willan, P. *Puppetmasters: The Political Use of Terrorism in Italy* USA: Authors Choice Press, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, M. 'Revealing the Hidden City: The cinematic conspiracy thriller of the 1970s' *The Italianist* No. 1, 2013.

American film scholar John Michalczyk has conducted comprehensive research of the films of both Rosi and Costa-Gavras: *The Italian Political Film-makers* sheds light on some of the conspiracy films of Rosi, while *Costa-Gavras: The Political Fiction Film* offers a film-by-film account of the director's work of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Michalczyk provides us with useful context, exploring the inspiration and sources of both film-makers. This aspect of Michalczyk's work is helpful in establishing the extent to which Rosi and Costa-Gavras had the same motivations and objectives as the British and Hollywood film-makers. However, Michalczyk's research is now more than thirty years old, and does not include analysis of the later work of either director. Furthermore, the age of Michalczyk's research means that it is not informed by more recent analysis like *Camera Politica*, about the ways in which style is used to present the theme of conspiracy.

*Cineaste* journalist Gary Crowdus has frequently examined the films of Costa-Gavras and his articles and interviews give a deeper understanding of the recurring themes in the director's work between 1968 and 1982.<sup>18</sup> The *Cineaste* interviews with Costa-Gavras provide first-hand accounts of the director's aims and intentions. The comments provided in these conversations offer a useful comparison between Costa-Gavras' opinions about the merits of the conspiracy form and those of the British and Hollywood conspiracy film-makers. Throughout his career, Costa-Gavras has given reflections about his films in a range of sources. The published version of his script for *State of Siege* from 1973 contains a collection of what the director calls 'reflections and documents' which reveal the motivation of the film-makers, and provide us with important political context. French critic Guy Hennebelle's article, 'Z movies or What Hath Costa-Gavras Wrought?', is particularly helpful in assessing the impact and wider contribution that the European conspiracy films have made to the thriller genre as a whole. Despite the fact that Hennebelle's article was written in 1974, his conclusions about the both the merits and

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<sup>17</sup> Michalczyk, J. *Costa-Gavras: The Political Fiction Film* USA: Assoc. University Presses, 1984;

Michalczyk, J. *The Italian Political Film-makers* USA: Associated University Presses Inc, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> See; Crowdus, G, and Georgakas, D. 'The Audience Should Not Be Just Passive Spectators: An Interview with Francesco Rosi' *Cineaste* vol.7, No.1, 1975. 6;

Crowdus, G. 'Z' *Cineaste* Vol. 27, No. 4, Autumn 2002;

Kalishman, H. & Crowdus, G. 'A film is like a match, you can make a big fire or nothing at all' *Cineaste*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1973. 2-7;

Rubenstein, L. & Crowdus, G 'The Missing Dossier' *Cineaste* Vol. 12, No.1, 1982. 30-38.

the flaws of the conspiracy genre are still relevant, and Hennebelle's conclusions provide a useful base from which to evaluate the effectiveness of the British conspiracy cycle.<sup>19</sup>

Given the academic interest in the Hollywood and European conspiracy cycles, it is perhaps surprising that so little work exists on the British conspiracy form. This is particularly perplexing when we consider Alan R. Booth's conclusion that, in terms of the development of the spy genre, 'it is the British who have initiated its greatest innovations over the years'.<sup>20</sup> What scholars such as Booth, Wark, and Cawelti and Rosenberg agree on is that it is the author John le Carré who re-defined the British spy story in the Cold War period. Though le Carré is often seen as a successor to Graham Greene, I would argue that Greene's novels have not had the same impact as that of le Carré's on shaping both the espionage and conspiracy genres on television and in the cinema.

Though there are clear comparisons between le Carré's espionage novels and the conspiracy thrillers, this does not mean that espionage narratives are conspiracy thrillers, and vice versa. The connection to le Carré is relevant because of the stylistic debt that the British case studies owe to his distinctive writing style. Though the critical and commercial success of le Carré's books has never waned, recent television and film adaptations of his work have reinvigorated academic interest in it.<sup>21</sup> Tomas Alfredson's 2011 *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* adaptation is discussed at length in a recent edition of *American Cinematographer*, which provides details about the importance of setting in le Carré's novels, and the ways in which *mise-en-scene* can be used to convey key themes.<sup>22</sup> In a very similar vein is J.D. Weiner's on-location report about BBC television's *Smiley's People*, which includes perceptive insights from the programme's cinematographer Kenneth Macmillan. Macmillan discusses how le Carré's enigmatic use of subdued tension and menace in his novels should be transferred effectively to the screen.<sup>23</sup> An examination of the stylistic qualities in screen adaptations of le Carré's work is apposite because of the

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<sup>19</sup> Hennebelle, G. 'Z movies or What hath Costa-Gavras wrought?' *Cinéaste* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1974. 28-31.

<sup>20</sup> Wark, 1991. 158.

<sup>21</sup> This includes *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (Alfredson, 2011); *Our Kind of Traitor* (White, 2016) and *The Night Manager* (Bier, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Oppenheimer, J. 'A Mole in the Ministry' *American Cinematographer*, Dec. 2011, Vol. 92 Issue 12. 28.

See also; Fisher, M. 'The Smiley Factor' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2, Winter 2011. 37- 42.

<sup>23</sup> Wiener, J.D. 'The Making of Smiley's People' *American Cinematographer*, Nov. 1983. 68-73.

debt owed by the British conspiracy thrillers to the BBC television productions of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (Irvin, 1979) and *Smiley's People* (Langton, 1983). As we will see there is no doubt that the British case studies would not exist in the form that they do, were it not for these seminal television productions.

In terms of the themes in John le Carré's work, political scientist Myron Aronoff has investigated how le Carré regularly explores betrayal and expediency in his novels; themes also central to the British case studies.<sup>24</sup> Le Carré himself has frequently discussed his continuing interest in these areas, as is clear from *Conversations with le Carré*, a collection of le Carré interviews which is, perhaps, the definitive source for perceptive reflections from the author himself.<sup>25</sup> The book's editors, Bruccoli and Baughman, have assembled twenty-five interviews from between 1965 and 2003. This collection has become even more valuable since September 2010, when le Carré announced that he would no longer give press interviews.<sup>26</sup> Tod Hoffman's *Le Carré's Landscape* provides us with a different perspective. Hoffman's research discusses the extent to which le Carré's writing provides us with an accurate portrait of the work of the intelligence services. Hoffman draws on his own experience in Canadian intelligence to examine le Carré's presentation of the secret world. Hoffman's rationale for this approach is that le Carré's novels have been fundamental in shaping the public's perception of, as Hoffman puts it, 'who spies are and what they do'.<sup>27</sup> Le Carré himself has frequently remarked on how his novels are read by the public as if they were handbooks on intelligence tradecraft. Le Carré's deft blending of fact with fiction is a feature not only of his work, but a recurring and prominent feature in the British case studies.<sup>28</sup> The British conspiracy thrillers make extensive use of this so-called 'faction' and verisimilitude.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout this thesis the terms faction and verisimilitude are applied frequently, and it is useful to define them here. Historian James Chapman refers to verisimilitude as a

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<sup>24</sup> Aronoff, Myron J. *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics* USA: St. Martin's, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Bruccoli, M. & Baughman, J. (ed) *Conversations with John le Carré* USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with John le Carré. Channel Four News. September 14<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<<http://www.johnlecarre.com/news/2010/09/14/jon-snow-s-interview-with-john-le-carre>>

<sup>27</sup> Hoffman, T. *Le Carré's Landscape* USA: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001.ix.

<sup>28</sup> John le Carré in conversation with Phillippe Sands. Hay Festival 2013, Friday 31 May 2013.

<<https://www.hayfestival.com/p-5496-john-le-carre.aspx>>

<sup>29</sup> Wark, 1991. 7.

means of explaining a film's ability to preserve the appearance of being real: 'It suggests something that is plausible or appropriate rather than something that is necessarily realistic'.<sup>30</sup> This is an integral part of how the conspiracy genre functions, because conspiracy thrillers rely on providing the audience with a plausible premise. Michael Denning reminds us that the thriller genre generally achieves this by drawing its narratives from the 'cover stories' of the day. They add plausibility by alluding to real-life political events reported on the front pages of the daily newspapers.<sup>31</sup> However, the conspiracy thriller is not necessarily an accurate depiction of real-life 'cover stories', but a 'construction...that accords with the ideological values of its film-makers and the cultural tastes of its audiences'.<sup>32</sup> In light of this comment, it is perhaps more helpful to consider the conspiracy thrillers as 'representations', a term used by film scholar Graeme Turner to describe these kinds of film.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, these conspiracy thrillers frequently present the audience with the film-makers' own subjective representations of the government and the security services, rather than a precise depiction of the work of British intelligence.

However, in some texts within the conspiracy thriller genre the issue of 'representation' becomes more complex. Wesley K. Wark reminds us that espionage films sometimes go further than using verisimilitude, that they seek to 'erase the signs of cinematic artificiality' rather than simply appear plausible.<sup>34</sup> This fact adds a more challenging dimension to the way we approach the conspiracy texts. Ryan and Kellner believe that films of this kind 'instil ideology by creating an illusion that what happens on the screen is a neutral recording of objective events, rather than a construct operating from a certain point of view'.<sup>35</sup> So while verisimilitude acknowledges the artificiality of film, conspiracy thriller films frequently go to great lengths to deliberately make the sense of artificiality more nebulous. We will see that in the case of the British conspiracy thriller, there is an attempt to manipulate the audience not only through allusions to real events, but by the adoption of realistic espionage tradecraft and jargon. Since the security

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<sup>30</sup> Chapman, J. *Film and History* UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 137.

<sup>31</sup> Denning, Michael, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.1.

<sup>32</sup> Chapman, J., Glancy, M. & Harper, S. (Eds) *New Film History* UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 7

<sup>33</sup> Turner, G. *Film as Film* UK: Routledge, 1988. 129.

<sup>34</sup> Wark, 1991. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan, M. & Kellner, D. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* USA: Indiana University Press, 1988. 1.

services are, by definition, secret, this allows the film-makers a high degree of creative licence. This is what Wark refers to as ‘faction’: the boundaries of fact and fiction are made deliberately opaque so that reality is counterfeited in order to add weight and impact to the message of the film.<sup>36</sup> Frequently in this thesis we will see the ways in which the conspiracy thrillers navigate a course that veers between both verisimilitude and faction: often the film-makers depict plausible representations and not factual realism (verisimilitude), while at other times details are given with the deliberate intention of counterfeiting realism (faction).

The British case studies focus to varying degrees on the work of three organisations within the British security services: Military Intelligence, Section 5 (MI5) largely responsible for domestic security; the Special Intelligence Service (MI6) dealing with threats from foreign nations, and Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) specializing in intercepting and interpreting communication and signals intelligence. The work of historians including Alwyn Turner, Sked and Cook and Richard Vinen have been employed to gain a broad understanding of the main social and political issues facing Britain during the 1980s.<sup>37</sup> However, my research has made particular use of intelligence histories in order to understand the political context to the British conspiracy thrillers. The intelligence histories employed here include several titles each by prolific authors in the field. Richard Aldrich has written at length about the work of the intelligence services. 2011’s *GCHQ* is particularly useful in deepening our understanding of the difficulties faced by that organisation during the 1980s; difficulties which are woven into the plot of *The Whistle Blower*.<sup>38</sup> Aldrich’s most recent book to date, 2016’s *The Black Door*, uses recently declassified government papers to examine the relationship between successive governments and the intelligence services. *The Black Door* includes a chapter devoted to Margaret Thatcher’s relationship with MI5 which establishes the conviction of the Conservative government and the intelligence community against perceived subversion, and provides details of the methods adopted to combat it.

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<sup>36</sup> Wark, 1991. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Vinen, R. *Thatcher’s Britain: politics and social upheaval of the 1980s* UK: Pocket Books, 2010;

Sked, A. & Cook, C. *Post-War Britain: 1945-1992* UK: Penguin, 1993.

Turner, A. *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1980s* UK: Aurum Press Ltd, 2013;

<sup>38</sup> Aldrich, R. *GCHQ*. UK: Harperpress, 2011. See also; Aldrich, R. & Cormac, J. *The Black Door*. UK: Collins, 2016.

Christopher Andrew's recent official history of MI5 offers comprehensive coverage of the scandals that blighted the service during the 1980s. His earlier work, *Instructions from the Centre*, co-authored with former Soviet KGB officer, Oleg Gordievsky, reveals the extent of Soviet subversion in Britain during the Cold War.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Anthony Glees' *The STASI Files* provides evidence on the extent to which Soviet and East German security forces penetrated British society during the 1980s. Intelligence histories such as these have been used to gauge the level of threat from Soviet and Eastern Bloc espionage activities during the 1980s. These sources help us to establish just how far the conspiratorial tone adopted by the film-makers was justified. Was the government overzealous in its attempts to combat Soviet subversion, as the British conspiracy thrillers suggest, or do they misrepresent the conduct of the government and the intelligence services? In addition, a number of public opinion polls from the 1980s conducted by the research company MORI have been used. These polls help to establish the public's attitude towards the British government's defence policy as well as the so-called 'special relationship' with the United States of America, and the approval ratings for the Conservative government and the prime minister. The public opinion polls help to reveal the extent to which the British case studies reflected national fears, or whether the films were simply projecting marginal concerns.

From a different perspective, intelligence historian Christopher Moran has provided a useful study of the ways in which the story of the Cambridge spies has been told and re-told on film and television over the last forty years. 'Filming Treachery: British Cinema and Television's fascination with the Cambridge Five', reminds us of the public's ongoing interest with this story of treachery within the Establishment. Despite the fact that none of the British case studies are mentioned in Moran's essay, the preoccupation with the Cambridge spies is a prominent feature in them. Elsewhere, Moran's book *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain*, examines the relationship between the government and the press over security matters.<sup>40</sup> This relationship also comes under scrutiny in

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew, C. *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* UK: Penguin, 2010. and Andrew, C. & Gordievsky, O. *Instructions from the Centre* UK: Hodder, 1993.

<sup>40</sup> Moran, C. *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* UK: CUP, 2012. and

Robert Dover's essay 'From Vauxhall Cross with Love'.<sup>41</sup> Of particular interest, is the fact that Dover discusses the extent to which the work of the security services has been hindered by negative depictions of their work in popular culture.

Christopher Moran reminds us that prior to the 1980s very little scholarly work about the intelligence community existed.<sup>42</sup> Contemporary security issues during that time remained explored predominantly by journalists in a style that has been dismissed by scholars as the 'airport bookstall of intelligence history'.<sup>43</sup> In gaining an understanding of the issues of the time, it would be remiss to focus exclusively on recent intelligence histories because much of what is known about security today as a result of de-classification would not have been in the public domain when the British case studies were in production.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, my research includes the work of journalists including Chapman Pincher. Pincher was arguably the most well-known journalist writing about matters of state security, and his articles for the *Daily Express* were indicative of those that shaped the public mood about the secret services, in lieu of official accounts.<sup>45</sup> Pincher not only had a regular column in the *Daily Express*, he was also a prolific writer of populist intelligence books, publishing nine between 1978 and 2011 which explored matters of intelligence in a frequently conspiratorial tone.<sup>46</sup> Two of Pincher's publications, *Inside Story* and *The Truth About Dirty Tricks*, provide the thesis with a flavour of the conspiracy theories that dogged the government at the time that the British conspiracy thrillers emerged.<sup>47</sup> The work of Robin Ramsay and Stephen Dorrill strikes a similar tone to Pincher. Ramsay

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Willmetts, S. & Moran, C. 'Filming treachery: British cinema and television's fascination with the Cambridge Five' *Journal of British Cinema and Television* vol.10, No.1, 2013: 49-70.

<sup>41</sup> Dover, R. Ed. *Spinning Intelligence: Why Intelligence Needs the Media; Why the Media Needs Intelligence* UK: Hurst & Co., 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Moran, C. 'The Pursuit of Intelligence History: Methods, Sources, and Trajectories in the United Kingdom' *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 55, No. 2: 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> This chapter has made use of formerly classified archival material including;

Smith, R. Salmon, P. & Twigg S.R. (Eds) *Foreign & Commonwealth Office: Documents on British Policy Overseas* UK: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> See Chapman, J. *Their Trade is Treachery*. UK: New English Library, 1982. This suggests that the former Director General of MI5, Roger Hollis, was a Soviet spy.

<sup>46</sup> E.P Thompson described the reporter unflatteringly as 'a kind of official urinal in which ministers and intelligence and defence chiefs could stand patiently leaking'. Seaton, J. 'The BBC and the 'Hidden Wiring' of the British Constitution: The Imposition of the Broadcasting Ban in 1988' *Twentieth Century British History* Vol. 24. No.3, 2013: 448-471.

<sup>47</sup> Pincher, C *Inside Story* UK: Sidgwick & Jackson. 1978

Pincher, C *The Truth About Dirty Tricks* UK: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1991.

considers himself a researcher of covert political activity, or a ‘para-political’ writer.<sup>48</sup> Ramsay and Dorrill began *Lobster* magazine together in September 1983, a journal devoted to conspiracy theories about intelligence. Though *Lobster* was and remains a very small publication, the articles published in its early years provide us with a clear sense of the marginal concerns that pre-occupied conspiracy theorists; precisely the kind of concerns which found their way into the British conspiracy thrillers.

The three case studies in this thesis are part of a wider collection of film and television texts that were produced in Britain during the 1980s dealing variously with government expediency, corporate malfeasance and corruption in the intelligence services. These include *Bird of Prey* (BBC, 1982), *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985), *In the Secret State* (BBC, 1985) and *A Very British Coup* (Channel 4, 1988). These productions emerged during a particularly prolific period for television adaptations of the novels of John le Carré including *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (BBC TV, 1979), *Smiley’s People* (1983) and *A Perfect Spy* (1987), all of which were typical of an appetite amongst television audiences for conspiracy-themed productions. John Caughie’s *Edge of Darkness* is the only book to date to deal exclusively with one of the British conspiracy productions. In it, Caughie provides extensive details about the political context to that series, noting that it was typical of a number of television programmes from the time which sought to make ‘sense of events...the anxieties, fears and angers which many of us felt’.<sup>49</sup> The 1980s more widely saw an increase in the kind of ‘cinematic dissent’ that sought to challenge the attitudes and conduct of the government. The increase in cinematic output serves to demonstrate that, as Tony Shaw argues, ‘a considerable proportion of the British people viewed the Thatcher government’s struggle against communism with scepticism’.<sup>50</sup> The British conspiracy cycle texts mined an increasingly rich seam of anxiety that was exploited by the film-makers, and which attempted to represent a culture in which conspiracy became a common currency.

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<sup>48</sup> Ramsay, Robin. ‘Of Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories: The Truth Buried by the Fantasies’ *Political Notes* 128 (1996). Cited in the text of a lecture delivered to ‘Unconvention 96’, which was organised by the *Fortean Times*, at the Institute of Education, London, April 20th 1996

<sup>49</sup> Caughie, J. *Edge of Darkness* UK: BFI Publishing, 2007. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Shaw, T. ‘From Liverpool to Russia, with love: A Letter to Brezhnev and Cold War cinematic dissent in 1980s Britain’ *Contemporary British History* vol.19, No.2, 2005: 243-262.

Writing in 1984, American film critic Harlan Kennedy was the first to formally recognise that a series of texts was emerging in British cinema that was conspiratorial in theme and style.<sup>51</sup> Kennedy is one of many American critics and scholars who have provided some of the most insightful reflections on the British conspiracy form. Part of the reason for this is perhaps due to the well-established tradition of conspiracy in American literature and film, as well as the wealth of conspiracy discourse in American academia. The following year, British film scholar Julian Petley also wrote about the increasing number of mainstream British conspiracy films that were in production. His article 'Intelligence Tests' remarks that:

'just as buggings, burglaries and bullyings of the Nixon era fuelled an intriguing cycle of paranoia movies in Hollywood...so the current mood of unease in Britain over matters such as the revelations of Sarah Tisdall, Clive Ponting and Cathy Massiter, the threat of civil liberties posed by the policing of the coal dispute, the governments management of the media during the Falklands war, and the persistent rumbling of the Hilda Murrell affair seems to be giving rise to a British strain of the genre'.<sup>52</sup> Here, Petley cites some of the most important political scandals which endured in the news headlines, fuelled public interest and also influenced the British conspiracy film-makers. It is interesting to note that Petley compares the political indignities in Britain with those of America. This comment serves to reinforce the links between the British cycle and its Hollywood forebears.

In recent times, Sergio Angelini and Mark Duguid have provided useful overviews of the British conspiracy texts. Angelini's 'Cold War Spies' discusses a range of espionage productions on television during the 1980s, while Duguid's 'Conspiracy Drama' offers a brief overview of conspiracy themed productions on British television. However, neither of these articles for the British Film Institute provides detailed discussion or rigorous analysis of the British conspiracy genre.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Kennedy, H. 'The Brits Have Gone Nuts' *Film Comment*, Vol.21, No.4, July/August 1985: 51

<sup>52</sup> Petley, J. 'Intelligence Tests' *Association Independent Producers & Co.* (Periodical), No.55, May 1985.

<sup>53</sup> Angelini, S. 'Cold War Spies' *BFI Screenonline*, n.d.

<<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1008415/index.html>>

Duguid, M. 'Conspiracy Drama' *BFI Screenonline*, n.d.

<<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/524081/index.html>>

Writing about the 1980s in British film, John Hill's *British Cinema in the 1980s* and John Friedman's *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* both examine socially - and politically - conscious films and the reasons for their emergence. Hill's book traces the ways in which different British productions during the 1980s were related to shifting social and political forces. However, Hill pays only fleeting attention to just one of the conspiracy films (*Defence of the Realm*) and dispenses with discussion of the contextual factors to which the film was responding. Furthermore, Hill's research is not concerned with exploring links to the Hollywood and European conspiracy cycles, which are foregrounded in this thesis.<sup>54</sup> While Lester Friedman provides insightful details about the cinematic response to Thatcherism, his book does not examine the conspiracy thriller genre.<sup>55</sup> Much more comprehensive is Joseph Oldham's recent doctoral research which has addressed the lack of work about the British conspiracy form. His 2013 thesis, *Serial Narratives of the Secret State in British Television Drama*, analyses both spy and conspiracy genres on British television. Oldham's research charts the development of these genres by exploring a number of key television productions, beginning with ITV's *The Sandbaggers* in 1978 and concluding with the BBC series *Spooks* (2002-2011). However, unlike this thesis, Oldham's research focusses on exclusively television dramas.<sup>56</sup>

My decision to focus on three British case studies might be seen as a potential flaw in the thesis which limits the scope of the research, and I would like to explain the rationale behind this decision. One important reason for focussing on the three chosen films is the timeframe that these British case studies represent. If we include the period of pre-production, the case studies cover a three-year period from 1984 to 1987. Though Hill warns us that it is rare for history to fall into 'neat patterns', he does acknowledge that the decade between 1980 and 1990 encapsulates the period of Conservative government in Britain and the policies of Thatcherism.<sup>57</sup> The time frame of the three case studies is important for two reasons: Firstly, beginning in 1984 allows sufficient time for the

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<sup>54</sup> Hill, J. *British Cinema in the 1980s* UK: Clarendon Press, 1999. 150.

<sup>55</sup> Friedman, L. *Fires Were Started: British Cinema & Thatcherism* USA: Columbia University Press. 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Oldham, Joseph Christopher. *Serial narratives of the secret state in British television drama, 1979-2010* Diss. University of Warwick, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Hill, 1999. 150.

policies associated with the Conservative government to become firmly established and embedded in the public's consciousness. By the time these films went into production, Thatcherism had come to fruition following the Conservative election in May 1979 and their landslide re-election in June 1983. After 1987 there began a gradual thaw in Cold War relations, but at the time that these films were in production, the improved relations with the Soviet Union were not yet fully realized. President Gorbachev's policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* that would prove so significant in bringing about the end of the Cold War did not take hold until well into 1987. This is significant because the British case studies in this thesis have been used as a means of understanding how they reflect the popular mood towards the Cold War from a time when it was still being fought. Later productions after 1987 to the end of the decade began to reflect the improved relationship between East and West.

The research at the heart of this thesis has involved the disciplines of both history and film studies. This inter-disciplinary approach has necessitated a particular methodology, and I have used the principles of New Film History as a means of examining the conspiracy thrillers.<sup>58</sup> In their book outlining the methods, sources and approaches of New Film History, Chapman et al foreground three key features. Firstly, New Film History recognises the importance of 'process and agency'.<sup>59</sup> 'Films,' argue Chapman, Glancy and Harper, 'are shaped...by a combination of historical processes', which gives credence to idea that a film's content and style can be 'determined by the context of production'.<sup>60</sup> In order to gain a deeper appreciation of the British conspiracy cycle, we must understand the extent to which the production process impacted on the films' effectiveness to deliver messages of conspiracy. In some cases, this has involved examining the process of adapting novels for the screen. The field of adaptation studies is substantial and one that has been 'bedevilled by the fidelity issue'.<sup>61</sup> However, this thesis is not concerned with how closely films relate to their original source material. Tom McFarlane reminds us that the real question is not how faithful a film is to the

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<sup>58</sup> Chapman, J., Glancy, M. & Harper, S. (Eds) *New Film History* UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 7

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> McFarlane, B. *Novel to Film* UK: Clarendon Press, 1996. 8.

source, but ‘how the approach to that source serves the film’s ideology’.<sup>62</sup> Where differences between the novel and film versions are highlighted, it is because those differences demonstrate how the ideology of the source has been altered, and there is considerable evidence which demonstrates how ideological, creative and commercial conflicts have impacted on the process of film production.

The second aspect of New Film History focusses on the importance of primary sources: ‘the new film historian is comparable to an archaeologist who unearths new sources and materials, especially those which have been previously disregarded or overlooked’.<sup>63</sup> Chapman et al note how memoirs, personal papers, scripts, publicity materials, reviews, fan magazines and internet discussion groups can be used to provide a richer understanding of film texts. My research into the British case studies makes use of publicity material sourced from production company archives, while London’s British Film Institute has provided reviews, rare production notes and screenplays that have also been brought to bear during the research. The case study chapters also draw heavily on first-hand accounts gained from interviews with the film-makers themselves, including directors, screen-writers, producers and novelists. The use of interview material can be problematic, giving rise to questions about the veracity of the information provided: how can we ensure accuracy when relying on recollections almost thirty years after the events, when ‘the human memory is fallible and there is the inevitable tendency to see events through the rosy tint of nostalgia?’<sup>64</sup> In most cases the process of interviewing more than one member of the production has allowed me to substantiate details and validate personal recollections. Where contradictions have occasionally occurred, I have not tried to conceal the fact. Indeed, contradictions have proved important in understanding the differing aims and objectives of the film-makers and the ways in which creative conflicts impacted on the films. At other times, conventional research using articles, reviews or other books has served to endorse information given in interviews.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>64</sup> Chapman, J. *Film Theory and History* UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 110.

It could be argued that the reflections of the film-makers are superfluous; that the film itself is of primary importance. However, interview material can be of great use to the film historian wishing to ‘add a material dimension to the analysis by showing how struggles for creative control can be glimpsed in the visual texture of the film itself.’<sup>65</sup> To misquote Donne, no film is an island: it is the fruit of collective labours, frequently buffeted during the production process by conflicting objectives and ideologies of the film-makers involved. Their comments have been applied when analysing each film in order to gain a deeper understanding of how their personal ideologies as well as conflicting objectives are manifested on the screen. It is also important to add that the views of the film-makers have assisted in understanding the flaws in each film, which has, in turn, enabled a more comprehensive consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the conspiracy form as a whole.

Finally, New Film History considers the visual and aural aspects of films.<sup>66</sup> Chapman et al remind us that ‘the film historian ought to have a modicum of technological knowledge in order to make judgements about visual style...that are historically appropriate’.<sup>67</sup> Where relevant, my analysis draws attention to shot composition in order to demonstrate how cinematography has been used to convey messages of conspiracy. More frequently, my analysis focusses on another aspect of film style: setting. Bordwell and Thompson’s examination of this aspect of *mise-en-scene* considers the reasons why film-makers make use of both real-life locations and constructed settings.<sup>68</sup> It is significant that the conspiracy thrillers in this thesis use real locations almost exclusively. This forms one part of the film-makers’ use of verisimilitude in order to present the government and the secret state in a negative light. The frequent adoption of well-known locations in the British thrillers, particularly locations associated with the Establishment and the government buildings within Whitehall, is a deliberate means of manipulating the audience’s perception of state institutions. Consideration of setting also includes reference to set decoration and property. As Jane Barnwell’s *Architects of the Screen* reminds us, such features can provide an audience with not only details of place but can

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<sup>65</sup> Chapman, J., Glancy, M. & Harper, S. (Eds) *New Film History* UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. *Film Art* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) USA: University of Wisconsin, 1990. 125-131.

also communicate ideas about the ‘psychology of the characters and in so doing offers a wealth of information about plot and narrative development’.<sup>69</sup> Barnwell’s ideas are applicable to all of the conspiracy thrillers here, and have been particularly useful when applied to the British case studies.

This thesis is organised in eight chapters. Chapters One and Two introduce the provenance of the British conspiracy case studies by exploring its American and European forebears respectively. An analysis of the conspiracy films from Hollywood and Europe helps us to identify the similarities and differences between these two cycles, and also draws attention to the hybridization of the conspiracy form. Chapter One begins with a consideration of historical context to the American cycle, including the political assassinations of the 1960s, impact of the Vietnam War and the widespread disillusionment created by the Watergate scandal. In addition to those events, during the early 1970s the American government was damaged by public disgraces such as those revealed in the *New York Times* that detailed CIA misdeeds against American citizens. Political controversies in America at that time were ubiquitous so that conspiracy had become, according to Francis Wheen, ‘the default mode of thinking’.<sup>70</sup> This first chapter demonstrates how these contextual issues resulted in a period that would prove to be the most bountiful to date in the history of conspiracy cinema. Chapter One pays particular attention to three conspiracy films: *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *All the President’s Men*. These three American films have been cited by the British conspiracy film-makers as sources of inspiration both in terms of style and narrative.<sup>71</sup> In Europe during the same period, Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi were responding to the spirit of discontent that swept through the continent, and their contributions to the conspiracy thriller genre are the focus of Chapter Two.<sup>72</sup> That chapter also provides details of the relevant historical context which informs the European conspiracy thrillers.

With Chapters One and Two having established lineage and the hybridized nature of the conspiracy thriller, Chapter Three turns its attention to Britain. This chapter explains one of the most important influences on the British conspiracy form: the novels of John le

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<sup>69</sup> Barnwell, J. *Production Design: Architects of the Screen* USA: Columbia University Press, 2004. 21.

<sup>70</sup> Wheen, F. *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia* UK: Fourth Estate, 2010.15.

<sup>71</sup> See; Stellman, M. E-mail to the author, 26<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012 and Drury, D. Interview with the author, 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

<sup>72</sup> Buchanan, T. *Europe’s Troubled Peace*. UK: Blackwell, 2008. 135-137.

Carré. Chapter Three begins by exploring le Carré's deviation from the conventions of the spy narrative. Thereafter, the chapter examines features of le Carré's literary style: the motifs and themes that are indicative of his work and which have been so important in shaping the style of the spy thriller genre in general and the conspiracy thriller in particular.

Chapter Four focusses on the historical context to the British case studies, providing an in-depth exploration of the political events of the 1980s which proved most influential on the case study films. The primary reason for the inclusion of this separate history chapter is to avoid diluting the case study chapters with lengthy diversions into historical events which draw the reader's attention away from a detailed analysis of each film. The second reason for including this context in one chapter is because my research has revealed that the same political circumstances impacted on all three films: to provide the necessary background for one film is to do so for all. Specifically, this chapter draws attention to the high proportion of security alerts, scandals and leaks that occurred in the 1980s; what Sked and Cook refer to as security service 'banana skins.'<sup>73</sup> The disproportionately high number of political scandals about the intelligence services fuelled public interest in security and defence issues. These issues were seized on by the British film-makers who used the conspiracy form to present their pessimistic message about the government and the intelligence community.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven deal chronologically with the three British case studies, with each chapter following the same format. Each one begins with an examination of the inspiration behind each film. In the case of *The Fourth Protocol* and *The Whistle Blower*, this involves understanding the aims and objectives of the novelists who wrote the original source material. In the case of *Defence of the Realm*, we will explore the motivation of the screen writer, and the script changes he conducted with the film's director. Thereafter, the case study chapters turn their attention to the production process, using first-hand accounts to chart each film's journey to the screen. The next part of these chapters considers aspects of style, focussing on characterisation and setting, and how each of

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<sup>73</sup> Sked, A. & Cook, C. *Post-War Britain: 1945-1992* UK: Penguin, 1993. 44.

these is used to communicate the theme of conspiracy. Finally, each case study concludes with a consideration of critical reception. Reviews have been used to identify the extent to which critics discussed the relationship between narrative content and political context. Furthermore, some critics also made connections between the style of the British conspiracy thrillers and how the films drew inspiration from the wider conspiracy genre in Hollywood and Europe, and from the style of John le Carré.

The final chapter presents my conclusions about the British conspiracy cycle. We will re-evaluate the films as representations of the British political landscape in the 1980s, asking what they can offer to cultural historians today. Following this is an examination of why the British conspiracy thrillers should be understood as part of a wider conspiracy thriller tradition, rather than as an isolated, largely forgotten, part of British cinema history. The final part of the conclusion confronts the criticism that the conspiracy form offers little more than ‘the sports fan’s view of history’.<sup>74</sup> Can the conspiracy thrillers provide audiences with salient and insightful political comment, or is their effectiveness diminished by a reductive form which presents a simplified view of political events?

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<sup>74</sup> Albert, M. ‘*Conspiracy? ...NOT!*’ *Z Magazine*, January 1992. 17-19.

## Chapter One

### The Hollywood Conspiracy Thriller

This chapter will provide a context to the British conspiracy thrillers by examining the debt they owe to a small number of mainstream Hollywood films that were released in the 1970s which dealt with the theme of conspiracy within government and the security services. The American conspiracy genre reached maturity by the mid-1970s, when we find the genre at its critical and commercial zenith. *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974) and *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) generated considerable interest in the wider theme of conspiracy while receiving critical acclaim and fourteen Oscar nominations between them. *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1974) won two awards for Gordon Willis' cinematography, including the National Society of Film Critics Award. These three films were all released in 1974, a particularly bountiful year for conspiracy as a theme given the increasing public interest in the Watergate affair. The following year *Three Days of the Condor* (Pollack) won five awards including the Edgar Allen Poe Award for Best Picture and was nominated for a further four. In 1976 *All the President's Men*, which told the story of the Watergate scandal, became the second highest grossing film of the year, won four Oscars and marked the completion of what is commonly referred to as director Alan J. Pakula's 'paranoia trilogy'.<sup>1</sup> During this period there were a slew of less successful conspiracy films that all dealt with the nefarious activities of the government and the security services. 1973's *Executive Action* (Miller) exploited popular suspicions about President Kennedy's assassination, while Stanley Kramer's *The Domino Principle* (1977) and William Richert's *Winter Kills* (1979) explored variations on the theme of political assassination. 1977's *Capricorn One* (Hyams) looked skyward and seized on rumours that the lunar landings had been faked by the government, while *The Groundstar Conspiracy* (Johnson, 1972) and *The Executioner* (Wannamaker, 1970) both starred George Peppard as members of the security services. The genre broadened beyond political conspiracy to explore corporate conspiracies in *Coma* (Crichton, 1978) and *The China Syndrome* (Bridges, 1979). The frequency with which the conspiracy theme was found in popular cinema

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<sup>1</sup> The trilogy comprises *Klute*, 1971; *The Parallax View*, 1974 and *All the President's Men*, 1976. *Klute* is not explored in this chapter since it does not explore the theme of government conspiracy as Pakula's other two films do.

during the 1970s suggests that film-makers were mining a rich seam of public mistrust about government institutions. The commercial success of the conspiracy films in turn suggests that such representations of ‘distrust towards those in power was resonating with audiences’.<sup>2</sup>

The films *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *All the President’s Men* are essential to a study of the British conspiracy thrillers because of the influence they exert over the films. The issues that are central to the British cycle were also being explored in their American forebears in the preceding decade. This meant that by the time the British film-makers were beginning to express their own concerns, they could turn to the American cycle to find an apt template from which they could find inspiration. This chapter does not seek to provide an exhaustive analysis of the American conspiracy thriller because this has already been achieved by film scholars and cultural historians.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this chapter will explore the relevant political events of the 1960s and 70s that impacted on the content of the American cycle. We will see how the fears about government conspiracy and the security services came about and why they proved so influential to the film-makers. The chapter will also examine the way in which the American conspiracy cycle developed a style that would be used as the template for the British films: specifically, how setting is used to communicate key themes of conspiracy. This chapter pays particular attention to *The Parallax View* and *All the President’s Men*, because these films demonstrate the partnership between director Alan J. Pakula and the cinematographer Gordon Willis, and this collaboration resulted in a depiction of interior settings and the urban landscape that served as a metaphor for the theme of conspiracy. The style that the film-makers employed in this area would prove influential on the British film-makers in the following decade.

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<sup>2</sup> Ryan, M. & Kellner, D. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* USA: Indiana University Press, 1988. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Including;

Arnold, G. *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television & Politics* USA: Praeger Publishers, 2008.

Donovan, B.W. *Conspiracy Films* USA: McFarland and Company Inc. 2011

Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* USA: Cornell University Press, 2000.

Pratt, R. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* USA: University Press of Kansas, 2001.

This chapter is included for the purpose of illuminating our understanding of the British conspiracy thrillers, so where important details about the American films have been omitted, it is because they do not help develop our understanding of the British cycle. Similarly, there are a number of excellent American conspiracy films that are considered by academics to be indicative of the genre (particularly Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*) that are not included here; this is because those films do not directly impact on the British films in this thesis.

Why then did America prove so ripe for conspiracy in the 1970s? According to Richard Dorfman, the ‘conspiracy impulse’ in mainstream Hollywood film emerged from the *film noir* genre because of the ‘furtive subculture’ that was typically the enemy in *film noir*.<sup>4</sup> Rather than the antagonist being a nefarious individual or small group, the antagonist in the conspiracy film is a large organisation: a government department or national corporation. As Dorfman states, ‘every conspiracy is a model of the modern totalitarian state... the government *is* the conspiracy and the institutions of state are at its disposal’.<sup>5</sup> The conspiracy genre gathered momentum during the tumultuous events of the Cold War during the 1950s when the fear of ‘Reds under the bed’ resulted in the feverish paranoia of the McCarthy witch-hunts.<sup>6</sup> The idea of a ‘Red Menace’ potentially lurking in the shadows inevitably served to foster a sense of mistrust. Richard Hofstadter’s essay ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ articulated the conspiratorial mood that was indicative of this era. For Hofstadter, the paranoid style was a ‘style of the mind’ which perceived the world as a series of potential threats; even home could not provide safe have from those who were intent on doing harm.<sup>7</sup> This perception captured the anti-Soviet rhetoric that appeared to permeate every level of society including school children being drilled to ‘Duck and Cover’ in case of nuclear attack.<sup>8</sup> Film scholar Ray Pratt believes the 1950s saw the beginnings of a common mood that would last through to the early 1970s and inform the pessimistic tone American conspiracy cycle. Like others, Pratt argues that the period was marked by a sense that the conspiracy form that emerged in popular film was ‘symptomatic of a pervasive anxiety concerning the ability to control our lives’.<sup>9</sup> He refers to this as ‘J. Edgar Hooverism’ after the former FBI director, who not only colluded with Senator Joseph McCarthy in rooting out communism, but whose detailed programme of surveillance reached far and wide in American life throughout the 1960s and ended only with his death in 1972.<sup>10</sup> After Hoover’s demise numerous details

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<sup>4</sup> Dorfman, R. ‘Conspiracy City’ *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 7, no.4 (1980): 434-56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Referring to Senator Joseph McCarthy who exploited and fuelled public fears about communism from 1950 when the senator claimed that he had information revealing the presence of over two hundred Communist Party members who were working for the State Department. The investigation would reach far and wide over the following two years. See; Freedland, M. *Witch-hunt in Hollywood: McCarthyism’s War on Tinseltown*. UK: Aurum, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Hofstadter, R. ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ *Harper’s Magazine* November 1964: 77-86.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Pratt, 2001.1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 4

about the misdeeds of the FBI and other security agencies emerged. Like Pratt, film scholar Barna William Donovan believes that the conspiracy genre developed in literature and film at this time because the nation was becoming more self-critical and more introspective.<sup>11</sup>

As well as the heightened public awareness of the threat of nuclear conflict, Timothy Melley's study of post-war American culture links the emergence of the conspiracy form to rapid social changes. Melley finds that the social, technological and industrial advances enjoyed in America during the 1950s came at a cost: inter-personal transactions was reduced, human interaction depersonalized and communities less cohesive. This resulted in a 'lonely crowd' mentality in which members of society became distanced from each other by the technological advances that were intended to make lives more efficient.<sup>12</sup> Melley argues that a by-product of these rapid social changes resulted in a sense of personal isolation with citizens feeling less like members not of a society but of a lonely crowd. These social factors coupled with the Cold War paranoia became 'symptomatic of a pervasive anxiety concerning the ability to control our lives'.<sup>13</sup> Melley uses the term 'agency panic' to describe this sense of loss of individual autonomy.<sup>14</sup> Despite Melley's case for agency panic, the extent to which this is the reason for the rise and popularity of the conspiracy genre in America is debateable. The emergence of conspiracy as a recurring theme is not linked solely to social and technological advances that is, for the most part, signs of a culture's positive development. Furthermore, evidence provided by the conspiracy film-makers themselves suggests that their work was a response to more immediate factors.

For the film-makers themselves, their interest in conspiracy as a form was based on much more immediate issues that confronted them in the newspapers and on television.

Following the witch-hunts of the 1950s, the conspiracy theme was reinvigorated in the wake of a series of political assassinations that deeply wounded the nation during the 1960s. The most traumatic of these was the murder of President Kennedy in Dallas in

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<sup>11</sup> Donovan, B.W. *Conspiracy Films USA*: McFarland and Company Inc, 2011. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America USA*: Cornell University Press, 2000. 47.

<sup>13</sup> Pratt, 2001.1.

<sup>14</sup> Melley, T. 2000. 47.

November 1963. Barna Donovan considers the president's assassination to be the catalyst for the conspiracy genre.<sup>15</sup> However, this view does not take into account the fact that the genre is prone to hybridizing, so while the Kennedy assassination certainly inspired a particular kind of political assassination conspiracy film, the wider genre had already emerged in the 1950s political conspiracy thrillers like *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Hitchcock, 1956).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) dealt with political assassination a year before the Kennedy assassination, giving the film a chilling prescience. The writer James Piereson determines that the Kennedy assassination marked the moment when 'America lost its innocence',<sup>17</sup> and that event was followed by the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy in June 1968. The Senator's murder was rumoured among conspiracy theorists to be the result of a government sponsored mind-control research such as the CIA's MK-Ultra programme.<sup>18</sup> Both killings gave rise to widespread conspiracy theories, as did the sense of panic resulting from the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, an event the presidential aide Arthur Schlesinger called the 'most dangerous moment in human history'.<sup>19</sup>

Political assassination and the threat of nuclear war were both seized on by John Frankenheimer, made two of the most critically acclaimed conspiracy thrillers of the 1960s, not only *The Manchurian Candidate*, but also *Seven Days in May* (1964). Reflecting on his contribution to the conspiracy cycle Frankenheimer recalled that 'we believed that we were in a society that was brainwashed. And I wanted to do something about it....more and more I think that our society is becoming manipulated and controlled.'<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that the director's concerns are comparable to those voiced by Robert Redford whose name would be attached to two defining films of the genre, *Three Days of*

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<sup>15</sup> Donovan, 2011. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood* UK: Routledge, 2000. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Piereson, J. 'The Day the Nation Lost its Innocence.' *New York Post* 10<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2013

<<http://nypost.com/2013/11/10/the-day-the-nation-lost-its-innocence/>>

<sup>18</sup> The CIA's MK-ULTRA programme was just one of the illegal CIA operations that were brought to the public's attention by the investigations of the New York Times in 1974. The revelations prompted the government to investigate Church Committee in 1975. It is worth remembering that the revelations and investigations of 1974/75 followed just a few months after that conclusion of the Watergate scandal and therefore contributed to the popularity of the conspiracy genre. See Andrews, G. *MKULTRA: The CIA's Top Secret Program in Human Experimentation and Behavior Modification* USA: Healthnet Press, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Dobbs, M. 'The Cuban Missile Crisis' *New York Times* n.d.

<[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/c/cuban\\_missile\\_crisis/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/c/cuban_missile_crisis/index.html)>

<sup>20</sup> Pratley, G. *The Films of John Frankenheimer*. USA: Lehigh University Press, 1998. 40.

*the Condor* (as lead actor) and *All the President's Men* (as producer and actor).<sup>21</sup> Redford believed that the obsession with 'secrecy and surveillance has spawned a monster in America: a state security apparatus that acted like a law unto itself.'<sup>22</sup> So from Frankenheimer's conspiracy films of the early 1960s, through Redford's contributions to the genre in the mid-1970s, we see a sentiment that spans the decades: the shared concerns of film-makers about the conduct of the government and secret state. It should be noted that the extent to which the film-makers' fears of surveillance were based on genuine continuing threats to civil liberties is debatable, and Gordon Arnold reminds us that conspiracy has more to do with perception than actual events; what is important is that Frankenheimer, Redford and others had the same perception of what was happening in their respective societies.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, their views bear a striking resemblance to the views of European film-makers Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi as well as those involved in the British conspiracy cycle. Such concerns are therefore not limited by temporal or geographical constraints and we see the perception of state conspiracy recurring in the Hollywood, European and British cycles over time.

By the time film-makers like Pakula and Pollack began work on their own conspiracy thrillers in the 1970s, a climate had emerged in which conspiracy had become 'the default mode of thinking' and the theme was given a new impetus for a number of reasons.<sup>24</sup> Pakula and Pollack represented the 'baby boomers', the new generation who had grown up in the shadow of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the political assassinations of the President and Senator Kennedy. This generation represented middle-America and were the young people who ran the risk of being drafted into the deeply unpopular Vietnam War. The extensive television coverage of the final troops being hauled from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon in 1975 hurling smoke bombs at Vietnamese civilians desperate for safe haven seemed to many to be indicative of the way in which the government had mishandled the conflict. Not only were troops at odds with former allies, but the shootings of four student anti-war campaigners at

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<sup>21</sup> Redford was so interested in the Watergate scandal that the author personally contacted Woodward and Bernstein regularly throughout their reporting of the story and eventually invested \$450,000 of his own money to secure the rights to the book. See Shaw, T. *Hollywood's Cold War* UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 254.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold, 2008. 1.

<sup>24</sup> When, F. *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia* UK: Fourth Estate, 2010.15.

Kent State University a year earlier put the government at odds with its own electorate. In both cases, the role of the media was essential because the cameras rolled as the scandals unfolded and ordinary Americans witnessed the events for themselves. It was in the wake of these events that the conspiracy thriller genre enjoyed its greatest success with productions from film-makers who had been shaped by these events. By mid-1974, when conspiracy could be found in cinemas in *The Conversation*, *Chinatown* and *The Parallax View*, it was the Watergate scandal that was capturing the interest of the nation, tainting the White House and exposing disgraced President Richard Nixon as ‘a bitter, foam flecked often drink sodden misanthrope’.<sup>25</sup>

To add to this, the American security services were damaged by revelations about the extent to which the CIA, NSA and FBI were being put to use for nefarious ‘anti-American’ purposes. Such revelations prompted public debate about what these agencies were doing in their name. The COINTELPRO revelations are the best example of the controversies that blighted the American security agencies in the early 1970s (deriving from Counter Intelligence Programme). In 1971, burglars stole close to 1000 documents from an FBI office in Pennsylvania. Extracts from these highly classified papers were despatched to the press including *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. The papers related to FBI Director Hoover’s 1956 Counter Intelligence Programme that sought to monitor and disrupt dissident groups. Three years after these revelations, *New York Times* journalist Seymour Hersh revealed how the CIA’s Operation CHAOS had compiled 13,000 files on 7200 American citizens over a six year period beginning in 1967. What these scandals shared was a highly public disclosure about mass surveillance of members of the population who were not conventional threats to the state or public security; individuals who did not have any criminal convictions and were not agents of any foreign power. The notion that the instruments of state security could be turned upon ‘ordinary’ people was a deeply troubling one that helped to foster a feeling of conspiracy that mainstream film-makers were about to seize upon.

Alan J. Pakula’s *The Parallax View* was based on the novel of the same name by Loren Singer, published in 1970. The film version was adapted by Lorenzo Semple Jr and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 118.

David Giler, though the film's star Warren Beatty is also credited with contributing to the script during filming. The story begins with the assassination of Senator Charles Carroll (William Joyce) at a rally taking place at the Seattle Space Needle. Three years later reporter Lee Carter (Paula Prentiss) is investigating the deaths of numerous witnesses to the assassination who have since died in mysterious circumstances. Carter believes that there is a conspiracy and she shares her concerns with fellow journalist Joe Frady (Beatty). Frady is dismissive, but when Carter is found dead following an apparent overdose of barbiturates, he is compelled to continue his friend's investigation. Eventually this leads the reporter to the enigmatic Parallax Corporation. Frady discovers that the corporation runs an intricately managed recruitment process to find would-be political assassins who it then trains and deploys for the purpose. The last third of the film is largely devoted to Frady identifying and then trailing a Parallax assassin (a deliberately unnamed character played by Bill McKinney). Frady follows the man to a conference centre believing that he can intervene to prevent another killing, only to realise too late that he has been deceived and set up to take the blame for the assassination himself. Another senator is shot, with Frady framed for his murder and then killed whilst trying to escape. The film ends with a senate commission ruling that there was no conspiracy; it concludes that Frady was a lone assassin who had become mentally unstable following the death of his friend Carter.

The film's final moments draw deliberate links to the famous Warren Commission of 1964 that investigated the John F. Kennedy assassination and ruled that the President's murder was the work of lone assassin Lee Harvey Oswald. The film's title refers to the way in which an object changes according to the perspective or angle from which it is viewed. This idea underpins Pakula's narrative, and the way in which the events unfold is deliberately manipulated by the director so that it is only in the penultimate scene that the audience is permitted to see the true nature and breadth of the conspiracy. In a sense, Pakula creates his own parallax: the truth is obfuscated in scenes that are constructed to deliberately mislead Frady and the viewer. Like Frady, we only comprehend the conspiracy when Pakula permits us to see it from a particular angle.

The central hero of *The Parallax View* is indicative of the conspiracy thriller protagonist. Played by Hollywood romantic leading man Warren Beatty, there is a clear sense that despite his good looks and natural charm, Frady is a man at odds with the world around him; he is more aptly understood as an anti-hero. The references to his alcoholism suggest a deep-rooted discontent, while his editor Bill Rintels (Hume Cronyn) is exasperated with his ever-present rebellious streak. When we first meet Frady he is chasing a story disguised as a vagrant (though Rintels tells him that his look is indicative of his life and work). He is presented as unscrupulous in his journalistic methods, and when we see him interacting with Lee Carter in his apartment, Pakula also establishes that he is isolated, selfish and disorganised. The director referred to Frady as ‘the totally rootless modern man’ and this strikes a chord with Melley’s definition of the lonely crowd that we have already explored.<sup>26</sup> The depersonalized world about which Melley writes is never more evident than in the representation of large scale corporations that grew in America at the time. Such corporations represent ‘the ultimate monolithic collective actor, the post-modern super-individual’.<sup>27</sup> This depiction resonates with Pakula’s portrayal of the Parallax Corporation in the film: it is anonymous, nebulous and secretive. It is not surprising therefore that we never learn the real name of any member of the corporation. Media Arts scholar Temenuga Trifonova believes that the issue of individual agency is ‘the by-product of routinized state of affairs...of seemingly benign corporate processes’.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Trifonova refers to such processes as ‘routinized’ would suggest that they became embedded slowly over time. We have seen that during the 1950s, there was a slow but determined erosion of individual agency. The narrative of *The Parallax View* depicts the journey of the protagonist to uncover and then attempt to thwart the conspiracy and in so doing regain agency. Recurring across much of the genre is the fact that the film-makers leave the audience with the hero’s failure to achieve individual agency and the suggestion that the conspiracy will be perpetuated.

The antagonist in the American conspiracy cycle is frequently nebulous, intangible and ultimately beyond the grasp of justice. This depiction reflects the way in which large

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<sup>26</sup> Brown, Jared. *Alan J. Pakula: His Films and His Life* USA: Back Stage Books, 2005.128.

<sup>27</sup> Melley, 187.

<sup>28</sup> Trifonova, Temenuga. ‘Agency in the Cinematic Conspiracy Thriller.’ *SubStance* 41.3 (2012): 109-126.

corporations grew with a scale and speed hitherto unseen in American culture and reminds of Hofstadter's assertion that the American public were facing an enemy that was a 'perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superhuman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel'.<sup>29</sup> The ubiquity of the villain is an idea that permeates the conspiracy thrillers and manifests itself in various ways. It reminds us of the depersonalized, faceless bureaucratic organizations that Melley and Pratt point to as a prerequisite of conspiracy; the feeling that we are controlled by forces we cannot truly comprehend. Certainly *The Parallax View* exploits this fear by revealing to the audience figures in suits that stand at the very edge of the frame watching Frady. They are nameless and bland in their appearance, 'impersonal functionaries of corporate society'.<sup>30</sup> The conspirators are indistinguishable from members of the public invariably lurking at the edge of the screen or are filmed in long shot so that, like Frady, the audience can never fully see them in close-up. This method of filming the perpetrators aptly captures the idea that we can never fully grasp the specific nature of the conspiracy, reminding us of Melley's notion that in the modern age, individual power and agency is subordinated to large impersonal corporations. This confirms what Pakula said of his film: 'If the picture works the audience will trust the person sitting next to them a little less at the end of the film.'<sup>31</sup>

Pakula's intention that his viewers should leave *The Parallax View* with a sense of mistrust is partially achieved through the film's visual style, particularly setting. Indeed the use of setting is a vital aspect of the genre as a whole. Trifonova believes that the American conspiracy thrillers depict a 'heightened spatiality' and that setting is deliberately emphasised in order to convey the film's themes of paranoia, control and surveillance.<sup>32</sup> According to film scholar Robert Cumbow, Pakula's settings are emphasised by the adoption of long shots in the sequences that depict architectural space.<sup>33</sup> These shots vary in duration but rarely last for less than six or seven seconds, ample time for the viewer to absorb the details of the space that the characters inhabit. As evidence we might consider the shot of Frady following the Parallax assassin (McKinney) on the escalator as they

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<sup>29</sup> Hofstadter, R., November 1964, pp. 77-86.

<sup>30</sup> Ryan & Kellner, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Cumbow, R. '13 Ways of Looking at The Parallax View' *Movietone News*, 34, August 1974.

enter the conference hall. The shot lasts for over twenty seconds, forcing the viewer to absorb what is happening and evaluate what we are watching. The narrative is constructed so that at this point we believe that Frady is trailing the assassin unobserved. It is only in the final moments of the film that we realise that throughout this lengthy final act Frady has been framed for the assassination. Therefore during those moments when we are encouraged to look, absorb, reflect on and analyse what we are seeing, we are being manipulated by the director's sleight of hand, seeing only what he wants us to see, and not the reality of the conspiracy. Pakula's use of lengthy shots is something of a metaphor for Melley's arguments about familiar institutions becoming suspicious; Pakula's lingering shots force the viewer into a familiarity with the settings only for this familiarity to be subverted so that places we think we understand are in fact alien to us. This reminds us of the comments of John Frankenheimer and Robert Redford because *The Parallax View* presents us with a situation in which ordinary members of the public, in this case Frady and the audience are being manipulated and controlled.

One of the most significant uses of setting in *The Parallax View* is the depiction of the offices of the Parallax Corporation. The building is filmed as a monolithic glass structure made up of grids, lines and reflective surfaces. These qualities emphasise the themes of entrapment and control, with the abundance of reflective glass serving the idea that we cannot really penetrate the truth, that reality is obscured. Both the title of the film and the settings confirm that geometry is essential in *The Parallax View*. The corporation is defined by 'spacious, antiseptic, dehumanized environments, marked especially by parallel and perpendicular axes, crisscross pigeonhole patterns of building windows, girders, beams, corridors, and the oppressive angles of a huge dam'.<sup>34</sup> Such spaces are used metaphorically so that, as Ryan and Kellner have noted, architecture and scene construction serve to repeat the idea that the central character, Joe Frady, is overwhelmed by his environment.<sup>35</sup> This is never clearer than in the last act of the film which takes place in a large conference hall that is the site of a political rally. Throughout this almost fifteen minute sequence musicians rehearse a martial tune that eventually segues into 'Yankee Doodle Dandy'. We are shown numerous high-angle long-shots of the hall

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan & Kellner, 99.

bedecked with red, white and blue tables that depict the space as a vast star spangled banner when seen from above. Here just as in the sequences against the large backdrop of the Parallax Corporation, the characters are depicted as being insignificant in comparison to their surroundings.<sup>36</sup> The vast conference hall provides the backdrop to the film's devastating dénouement in which Frady is framed for a political assassination and then killed. Pakula's careful and lengthy Establishment of the features of Americana such as the colours of the flag and the patriotic music become ironic and serve the film's message that previously trusted institutions are no longer honest and reliable. In fact the whole film is peppered with similar symbols of Americana in an attempt to present them as anachronistic. The film opens with a parade on 4<sup>th</sup> July with a low-angle shot of a totem pole that pans left to reveal the Seattle Space Needle behind it and the director included this as a means of showing 'the America we've lost'.<sup>37</sup> For Pakula these icons were an anachronism; they represented ideals that were absent, or had been sullied by the events of the last decade: Vietnam, Watergate, the intelligence scandals and the political assassinations.

While *The Parallax View* engaged mainstream audiences in the conspiracy theories surrounding political assassinations and the MK-Ultra programme, Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* addressed the issue of CIA corruption. The film began production in 1974, though hasty rewrites of the script were made in order to exploit the revelations in Seymour Hersh's *New York Times* articles.<sup>38</sup> Pollack himself stated that it was his intention to explore 'the ideas of trust, suspicion and morality in the post-Watergate era'.<sup>39</sup> In the film, Joel Turner (Robert Redford) – code named Condor – works as a low level analyst for the CIA in New York. Turner slips out for lunch only to return to find his entire department murdered. He then goes on the run to avoid the same fate. He follows protocol and makes contact with his superiors via phone but when an attempt to 'bring him in' goes awry Turner begins to suspect forces within the CIA of trying to silence him. As a result he decides to investigate on his own and in a moment of desperation kidnaps an innocent woman, Kathy Hale (Faye Dunaway). A number of attempts are

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<sup>36</sup> Brown, 136.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>38</sup> Shaw, T. *Hollywood's Cold War* UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 254.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 253.

made on his life including one by an assassin in the guise of a postman, and another by a mysterious European assassin. Turner's investigations lead him to his boss, Higgins (Cliff Robertson), at the Middle East operations of the CIA. In the final scenes Turner learns that the CIA has been scheming to take over the oil fields of the Middle East and that Turner's department was murdered because they may have inadvertently discovered the plot. In the film's final scene Turner confronts Higgins on a busy New York street. Higgins is unrepentant: the plans for the oil fields would have safe-guarded America's source of oil for years to come. Furthermore, Higgins believes that most Americans are content to be oblivious to the conduct of the security services as long as their interests are being protected by the state. Turner implies that he has given the story to the press to prevent any further conspiracy, but in the final moments as he walks away the audience is left with the lingering doubt about his future safety.

The fact that the conspiracy is squarely laid at the foot of the CIA's door reflected the humiliations that had beset the agency at the time. Pollack confirmed that he was a liberal, but insisted that he was not interested in abolishing the CIA. He was more concerned with the dramatic possibilities of a story that involved essentially honourable people in the security agencies engaged in conspiracy for the greater good.<sup>40</sup> As we can see, the ending of the film sees Higgins attempting to justify the agency's expediency in order to secure long term economic security and prosperity for American citizens. It is indicative of the conspiracy genre in America and elsewhere that *Three Days of the Condor* confronts the audience with the moral quandary that what is being done in order to maintain national freedoms is indistinguishable from what the enemy is doing to destroy them. As Pollack told journalist Scott Holleran, 'I'm much more interested in the CIA guys who are trying to help us and do something immoral than I am about guys who are just immoral because they want to sell dope and make money'.<sup>41</sup>

*Three Days of the Condor* was adapted from the book *Six Days of the Condor* by James Grady, published in 1974 (the novel's six days became three to increase the pace of the film).

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<sup>40</sup> Holleran, S. 'Sydney Pollack on Three Days of the Condor' *Box Office Mojo*, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2007, <<http://boxofficemojo.com/features/?id=2314&pagenum=2&p=.htm>>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The rights to Grady's novel were quickly secured when the producers recognised the way in which the novel captured the zeitgeist, and screenwriter Lorenzo Semple Jnr's adaptation would exploit the film's sense of cultural verisimilitude. Semple Jnr was already familiar with the genre having written the screenplay for *The Parallax View* and he creates the same conspiratorial milieu on *Three Days of the Condor*. Upon the film's release, many critics noted its pertinence to real events. *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby believed that it was 'no match for stories that have appeared in your local newspaper' and that Pollack's vision was 'never as horrifying as the real thing'.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Roger Ebert noted how swift the film was to seize on the stories in the popular press about the intelligence community, remarking, 'How soon we grow used to the most depressing possibilities about our government -- and how soon, too, we commercialize on them'.<sup>43</sup> What both these reviews seem to hint at is a sense of conspiracy thriller fatigue, with the film proving no real match for the revelations in the press or perhaps offering anything new to say about the intelligence community. It is worth remembering that *Three Days of the Condor* was released in America fifteen months after President Nixon had resigned from office, echoing the sentiment here that no fictional scenario could hope to outdo the real-life scenario of a disgraced President forced from office for malfeasance.

Also of interest in Ebert's review is his remark about the casting of Robert Redford in the main role: 'Hollywood stars used to play cowboys and generals. Now they're wire-tappers and assassins, or targets'.<sup>44</sup> This reminds us of how American culture had shifted to accommodate changes in the perception of heroism. The idealistic heroes that were embodied in the 1940s and 1950 by Cary Grant, James Stewart or John Wayne had now become anachronisms and seemed out of step with cultural developments. Robert Redford was at the height of his fame when he made *Three Days of the Condor* and just like Warren Beatty, Redford was a box-office star and sex-symbol. However, Redford eschewed the glamour of Hollywood, opting to lead an intensely private life in which he indulged his interest in social and political issues. This resulted in Redford's regular

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<sup>42</sup> Canby, V. 'Three Days of the Condor' *New York Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1975

<<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF173CE577BC4D51DFBF66838E669EDE>>

<sup>43</sup> Ebert, R. 'Three Days of the Condor' *rogerebert.com*, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1975 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/three-days-of-the-condor-1975>>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

involvement in films with a strong political dimension such as *The Candidate* (Ritchie, 1972), *Three Days of the Condor*, *All the President's Men* and *Brubaker* (Rosenberg, 1980). Like Joe Frady, Redford's Joe Turner is an unremarkable man who is depicted early in the film as insubordinate and rather languorous; a reluctant hero. For example, when he discovers the murder of his colleagues he is preoccupied with finding safe haven, desperately telling the CIA switchboard operator that he is not a field agent and therefore is ill-prepared for the danger he is in. In this way, both Frady and Turner are representative of a newly emerging Hollywood protagonist. Like Frady, Turner represents the anti-heroes of the genre who were not in the traditional style of cowboys and generals that Ebert refers to. These characters are more readily identifiable to the audience. They are ordinary, unheroic, and unsuccessful both professionally and in personal relationships, and appear to be disillusioned with society. They are, in fact, typical of the 'lonely crowd' of American citizens.

Redford would return to the genre the following year for the last of Alan Pakula's so-called 'paranoia trilogy', *All the President's Men*. The film tells the real-life story of *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's arduous investigation into the Watergate scandal. What began as a minor burglary at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate Complex in Washington D.C. on the night of June 17<sup>th</sup> 1972 would lead to the resignation of President Richard Nixon as well as the conviction of numerous senior White House staff members just over two years later. Woodward and Bernstein are very much ordinary heroes whose investigation soon metamorphoses into a gargantuan struggle against the government. It was Redford who immediately saw the dramatic possibilities of the story, particularly the antagonistic relationship between the odd-couple pairing of Woodward and Bernstein. Redford approached the reporters to discuss securing the film rights to the story as early as 1974.<sup>45</sup> At the time they were writing their experience of the case and the resulting book would become *All the President's Men*. The film rights to the best-seller were then secured by Redford. Like the book, Pakula's film is told entirely from the journalists' perspective. When we see members of the President's staff it is almost exclusively through the use of real television news footage from the time. This is an important feature of the film, the

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<sup>45</sup> *All the President's Men Revisited* Partisan Pictures, Discovery Channel, 2012.

only conspiracy thriller that is firmly rooted in an actual event. By the time the film was released in 1976 the Watergate scandal had touched the lives of all Americans. This made it almost impossible to present the antagonist in Pakula's preferred style of menacing anonymity as he had done in *The Parallax View*. However, although the antagonist is known to the audience, the fact that very few members of Nixon's Republican government appear as characters means that the director can keep them hidden behind the scenes and retain the requisite sense of anonymity and hidden menace that is indicative of the genre.

The film reunited Pakula with cinematographer Gordon Willis and the collaboration saw a return to the same stylistic devices that the pair had used to suggest conspiracy on *The Parallax View*. Specifically, with the absence of a physical villain in the story, the pair relied once more on the use of setting as a metaphor for the antagonist's power and control of events. The modern and impersonal glass and metal structures that populate *The Parallax View* are in keeping with Melley's idea of the anonymous corporate world which threatens the individual. In contrast, the architectural decadence of the government district in *All the President's Men* serves to show how the values on which the nation is built are being undermined by government conspiracy. Pakula's depiction of these buildings also conveys a sense of permanence and power, reminding the audience of the insurmountable odds that are faced by the investigative reporters. One of the most famous sequences of the film shows Woodward and Bernstein following a lead in Washington's Library of Congress. One particular shot is filmed from above the men and the camera slowly zooms out to reveal the entire library. When in extreme long shot, the scene shows the journalists as little more than dots amid the shelves of information they are searching through. This technically difficult sequence was achieved using two telescopic dissolves at a cost of \$90,000, which was disproportionate to the rest of the film's budget but was essential to the plot for Pakula because 'it gave me a sense of the how lost they are in this thing, how tiny these figures are in terms of the enormity of the task'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Brown, 188.

Pakula also exploited light as a metaphor in *All the President's Men*. The use of light and dark is another feature that the genre owes to its *film noir* origins, and star/producer Redford explained that the use of chiaroscuro lighting was intended to convey the way in which the journalists frequently find themselves literally and metaphorically in the dark. This is never more evident than in the scenes between Redford and Hal Holbrook (appearing as the secret and anonymous government source nick-named Deep Throat). Such scenes are entirely in silhouette with the smoke from Deep Throat's cigarette trailing enigmatically into the air in true *film noir* style.<sup>47</sup> Willis recalled that 'some scenes are shot entirely in silhouette,' and that this was deliberate in order to evoke 'a child's fears of darkness.....that there is something out there that you can't see that could destroy you'.<sup>48</sup> These moments contrast dramatically with the scenes at *The Washington Post*, a specially built set on the California sound stage designed by George Jenkins.<sup>49</sup> The set was deliberately bathed in fluorescent light because the director wanted to depict the newsroom in contrast as 'a world without shadows...where nothing is hidden'.<sup>50</sup>

Pakula's 'world without shadows' in *All the President's Men* suggests an idealistic view of the journalistic profession. We are reminded of the importance of journalism in exposing the stories of subterfuge and scandal in real-life such as Watergate but also COINTELPRO and the CIA revelations in the *New York Times*. Like the leads in *All the President's Men*, Joe Frady in *The Parallax View* is a journalist, while in *Three Days of the Condor* Joe Turner decides that the only way that he can reveal the CIA's corruption is to turn to the press. It is interesting to note that journalists are also lead characters in later conspiracy thrillers including *Capricorn One*, *Coma* and *The China Syndrome*. The American conspiracy cycle suggests that since the official bodies usually charged with safeguarding security and justice are exposed as the conspirators, it is left to the journalists to adopt the mantle of torch-bearer for traditional values. Professor of Journalism Matthew Ehrlich explains how the film version of *All the President's Men* exemplifies the Great Man theory which suggests that change results 'almost exclusively from the actions of dynamic

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 165.

individuals'.<sup>51</sup> However, it is interesting to note that this is not always the case in the conspiracy thriller genre. The protagonist's ability to affect change is mitigated: in the case of Joe Frady, the character is sacrificed in the pursuit of the truth. The implication in *Three Days of the Condor* is that Joe Turner's life remains under threat from his former employers. These examples are at odds with Ehrlich's theory, and seem to subvert the convention that the actions of the heroic journalist can affect enduring change. Certainly for Pakula, America had 'become a world in which the heroes didn't necessarily win...you never find the evil. It permeates the society'.<sup>52</sup> Pakula's belief that the evil had 'permeated' society aptly demonstrates just how disillusioned he and other film-makers had become.

*All the President's Men* was the second-highest grossing film of 1976, winning four Academy Awards and being nominated for a further four. Cerebral, bleak and with a labyrinthine plot, it was not the kind of film that usually dominates the American box-office. This would suggest that the film's presentation of the government as conspiratorial and corrupt resonated with audiences. By the time the film was released conspiracy as a theme had become the 'default mode of thinking', and this feverish and productive period for paranoia and conspiracy themed productions continued, with other film-makers seeking to capitalize on the success of *All the President's Men*. Ryan and Kellner believe that the social traumas experienced by the nation had contributed to a national malaise, and the frequency of such films during the 1970s was indicative of a 'culture in decline, trying to come to terms with severe economic, political and social crises'.<sup>53</sup> That 'crisis in confidence' was seized upon by film-makers such as Pakula and Pollack who then sought to reflect the mood in their films.<sup>54</sup>

The 'spirit of self-flagellation' that gripped America at that time would be replaced with a more confident and optimistic vision in the 1980s.<sup>55</sup> The nation ushered in a new era marked by the sabre rattling rhetoric of the Reagan administration, which was reflected in

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<sup>51</sup> Ehrlich, M. *Journalism in the Movies* University of Illinois Press, 2004.113.

<sup>52</sup> Brown,125.

<sup>53</sup> Ryan and Kellner,76.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

popular film in the form of muscular action heroes such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone in whom audiences could seek refuge. In contrast, as this more affirmative vision was reaching American audiences, British audiences were being fed an increasingly pessimistic diet of conspiracy thrillers in the vein of those that had been served to America in the previous decade. This fact reminds us that the conspiracy form has proved to be both ‘durable and adaptable’.<sup>56</sup> This durability and adaptability allowed the genre to flourish through hybridization during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in America; the form was continually adapted by fiction-makers in order to address the political issues of the day. Contextual political factors changed over time: McCarthyist hysteria in the 1950s gave way to nuclear brinkmanship during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s. Thereafter the conspiracy form was used as a means of exploring political assassination and the Vietnam War. By the 1970s the Cold War proved less inspiring than the domestic scandals that beset the security agencies as well as the Watergate affair, which revealed corruption in high office. The genre’s ability to hybridize helps us to appreciate why the conspiracy form emerged in Britain. Despite the different social and political context, many film-makers believed that the conspiracy form was the most effective way to respond to political events. At the same time that the Hollywood film-makers were making use of the conspiracy form, two European directors, Constantin Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi, were also casting a critical and conspiratorial eye over world events.

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<sup>56</sup> Arnold, 5.

## Chapter Two

### The European Conspiracy Thriller

In contrast to the Hollywood conspiracy cycle, there is considerably less scholarly examination of the European conspiracy genre available in the English language. Before beginning it may be helpful to offer a short clarification on the taxonomy. I employ the term ‘European’ for a number of reasons: firstly it is a useful word to distinguish between the American and British cycles because the four films being explored in this chapter are the work of two European film-makers between 1967 and 1976. Constantine Costa-Gavras is of Greek origin but fled the country for political reasons at a young age in order to live and work in France, where he adopted French citizenship. The second film-maker, Francesco Rosi, lived and worked exclusively in Italy until his death in 2014. Another reason for using the term ‘European’ is that in exploring the genesis of the sub-genre, we find that writers who have focussed their attention on American texts have often referred to the way in which the conspiracy sensibility is European in nature: director Alan J. Pakula referred to the style of *The Parallax View* as ‘European...Kafkaesque’<sup>1</sup>, while Schell notes the cynical tone that can be found in American texts is ‘all too familiar to anyone who has spent some time in Europe’.<sup>2</sup> Hofstadter’s seminal essay on the ‘Paranoid Style’ in American also alludes to a similar style being present in European culture.<sup>3</sup> What these comments point to is a particular sensibility and familiarity with the conspiracy form that is distinctly European. Finally, although three of the four films referred to in this chapter were filmed outside Europe, they were financed predominantly with money from Europe and made with European cast and crews.

As overtly political film-makers, it is impossible to divorce the work of Costa-Gavras and Rosi from the political context of the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter will demonstrate how these two film-makers were responding to the same kind of motivating factors that

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<sup>1</sup> Pratt, R. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* USA: University Press of Kansas, 2001. 130.

<sup>2</sup> Chase Coale, S. *Paradigms of Paranoia* USA: University of Alabama, 2005. 1

<sup>3</sup> Hofstadter, R. ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ *Harper’s Magazine* November 1964: 77-86.

influenced the American and British conspiracy film-makers. May 1968 proved to be a significant time for the spirit of revolution across Europe, with a number of groups seeking to redress the perceived injustices in society, and bring to the fore a more left-wing social conscience. The kind of discontent that was felt at that time is strikingly familiar to the socio-political context to the British films that is explored in Chapter Four. The tumultuous political events in Europe fostered the key message of state corruption in the conspiracy films, depicting the government and the security forces as expedient, nefarious and manipulative. Whether set in Greece, Uruguay, Italy or Chile, the European conspiracy thrillers present an unequivocally negative message about the ways in which those in power abuse their positions for personal gain and how ordinary citizens are manipulated by the ruling power structures. In the work of Costa-Gavras in particular we are presented with one dominant message: that American covert imperialism has universally sought to impose the will of the United States on a number of weaker nations around the world, and that the domestic rulers of those nations are working at the behest of the American government.

The films that are explored in this chapter favour Costa-Gavras disproportionately to Rosi (with three films by Costa-Gavras and only Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses*). There are two reasons for this imbalance: the four films examined here are either cited as influences by the British film-makers themselves, or by critics who have drawn noteworthy parallels between them and the British productions. It is therefore important to state that despite Rosi's limited representation in comparison with Costa-Gavras, he has produced many critically acclaimed films that can be justifiably termed as conspiracy thrillers. *Hands Over the City* (1963) won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival and told the story of corruption within the real estate business, while *The Mattei Affair* (1972) won the *Grand Prix* at Cannes and explored corporate conspiracy in the oil business. The absence of a broader range of Rosi's work should not therefore be misinterpreted as the director having any less impact on the development of the European conspiracy thriller than Costa-Gavras.

As well as exploring contextual issues, the chapter will also turn its attention to two aspects of style: characterisation and setting. The characters and the use of locations in

the European conspiracy thrillers are clear means by which the film-makers have communicated their message about the corruption and treachery of the secret state. In terms of characterisation, we will examine the ways in which the protagonist of the European conspiracy thriller is typical of the 'lonely man' in the American texts;<sup>4</sup> a character increasingly at odds with those around him, driven into isolation on his cathartic but ultimately self-destructive journey. We will also explore the depiction of the antagonists, the conspirators from within the secret state who subordinate morality for expediency. In terms of setting, the chapter will explore how the architecture of power is employed both literally and metaphorically in order to show the ways in which the state controls and manipulates the individual. The final section of the chapter reflects on the criticism that has been levelled at the European conspiracy thriller by its detractors. While critics acknowledge that the genre is not without merit, many argue that any effective political comment is hindered by the constraints of the conspiracy form. The criticisms levelled at both Rosi and Coast-Gavras are important: they would also blight the film-makers of the British films during the 1980s.

The latter part of the 1960s saw winds of change blow across Europe, and the left-wing spirit of revolution found its way into the conspiracy thrillers of the time. Though May 1968 has become synonymous with the mood of the period, the impetus for change continued well into the following decade, and the development of the European conspiracy thrillers continued alongside these calls for revolution.<sup>5</sup> During this time a variety of left-wing groups saw a surge in popularity, from those appealing for sedate liberal reforms, to others who would settle for nothing less than a radical overhaul of the political landscape. There were those who sought change by peaceful means, and a burgeoning of support for those who did not, including a number of terror organisations like the Baader-Meinhof group in West Germany.<sup>6</sup> In France in early 1968 the *Partie Communiste Francais* (PCF) and the *Federation de la Gauche Democratique* (FGDS) issued a

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<sup>4</sup> Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* USA: Cornell University Press, 2000. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Buchanan, T. *Europe's Troubled Peace* UK: Blackwell, 2008. 135-137.

<sup>6</sup> Bracke, M. 'From the Atlantic to the Urals? Italian and French Communism and the question of Europe 1956-1973' *Journal of European Integration History*, vol. 13, No. 2, 2007.33-54 <[http://www.eu-historians.eu/uploads/Dateien/jeih-26-2007\\_2.pdf](http://www.eu-historians.eu/uploads/Dateien/jeih-26-2007_2.pdf)>

common declaration of solidarity.<sup>7</sup> This is indicative of the strong shift left that was to epitomise the French political landscape for the following years. French film scholar Guy Hennebelle noted that many directors were beginning to ‘put cinema at the service of national or international struggles’.<sup>8</sup> This would include both Costa-Gavras in France as well as Rosi in Italy. Tom Buchanan’s history of the period reminds us that the arts – and film in particular – played a significant part in the culture of change, with a number of film-makers exploring hitherto taboo subjects in innovative new ways.<sup>9</sup> Cinema was also shifting to accommodate the tastes of a younger audience, and coupled with this was the coming-of-age of a whole generation of cine-literate film-makers who were eager to extend and exploit the uses and possibilities of film.<sup>10</sup>

One film in particular proved highly influential on the conspiracy thrillers that emerged in its wake. Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) depicted the Algerian struggle for independence from the French in the 1950s and is hailed as the forerunner to a slew of political films, including those of Costas-Gavras and Rosi. A committed Italian Marxist, Pontecorvo adopted neorealist techniques in order to create a film that fused documentary with fiction in a way that had not been seen before, including the use of cast members who had themselves fought in the struggle for independence.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the director insisted on adopting hand-held cameras, as well as filming in black and white to give the film a news-reel quality. *The Battle of Algiers* eschewed audience-friendly narrative techniques such as a romantic subplot, comedic relief, or a contrived ‘ticking bomb’ denouement. Pontecorvo had no time for such distractions and instead sought to promote a clear political message devoid of the fripperies of conventional cinema that would, in his opinion, likely overwhelm the serious issues being raised.

The significance of *The Battle of Algiers* for the conspiracy thriller genre is that left-wing film-makers found inspiration from Pontecorvo’s style; adopting and refashioning, using the film’s ‘anti-Establishment messages for their own ends’.<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hennebelle, G. ‘Z movies or What hath Costa-Gavras wrought?’ *Cinéaste* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1974. 28-31.

<sup>9</sup> Buchanan, 2008.186.

<sup>10</sup> Solanas, F. and Getino, O. ‘Toward Third Cinema’ *Cinéaste* Vol. 4, No. 3, Winter 1970-71.1-10.

<sup>11</sup> Shaw, T. *Cinematic Terror* UK: Bloomsbury, 2015. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 97.

clarify that Pontecorvo's film is more confrontational than most of the conspiracy films that would draw inspiration from it. *The Battle of Algiers* sits firmly within the realm of what is called Third Cinema, while the films of both Rosi and Costa-Gavras were always intended for mainstream audiences.<sup>13</sup>

Regarded by many as the cinematic heir to *The Battle of Algiers* is Costa-Gavras' *Z*, the film that launched the director and established him as a significant film-maker of conspiratorial political thrillers. Although not his first film (he had attained modest success with *The Sleeping Car Murders* in 1965), it was with *Z* that Costa-Gavras truly confirmed himself as a note-worthy political film-maker. *Z* was co-written by Spanish writer Jorge Semprun, a committed organizer of the exiled Spanish Communist Party during the reign of General Franco. This fact together with Costa-Gavras' fervent left-wing views marked them out as a team that epitomized the radical reformist fervour that swept Europe in the late 1960s. *Z* is set in an unnamed country and tells the story of the assassination of a left-wing politician known as 'The Deputy' (Yves Montand), at the behest of senior political figures in the military dictatorship fearful of leftist subversion. We have seen that Alan Pakula described qualities in his own films as 'Kafkaesque', and the term might also be validly used when considering *Z*. Like Kafka's *The Trial*, Costa-Gavras chooses to leave the Deputy unnamed and set the action in an unspecified country. This imbues the film with a universal quality in order to demonstrate that the film's main theme of state corruption is not unique to one particular nation. As the screenwriter told *Cineaste*, 'Let us not try to reassure ourselves, this type of thing doesn't only happen elsewhere, it happens everywhere.'<sup>14</sup> This reminds us of the universality of the revolutionary ideals that were so closely associated with 1968; the fact that the film began production that same year is highly significant.

Far from being a 'universal' fictional narrative, *Z* is an account of the real-life assassination of the Greek politician Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963. The action is clearly set in Greece and despite the director's claim of universality, we see numerous signifiers that

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<sup>13</sup> Wayne, M. *Political Film: The Dialects of Third Cinema* UK: Pluto Press, 2001.10. Wayne reminds us that Third Cinema is 'committed to social and cultural emancipation'. Film-makers frequently 'wrote manifestos and considered political implications of film-making.'(Wayne,10).

<sup>14</sup> Crowds, G. 'Z' *Cineaste* Vol. 27, No. 4, Autumn 2002. 53.

leave us in no doubt about the location. There are two mid-shots of a photograph of the Greek royal family at one point, we see an advert for a Greek beer in a bar room scene, and the landing of an Olympic Airlines flight elsewhere. The assassination of Lambrakis had had a profound effect upon the Greek people for the way in which his murder pointed the finger at those in power. We should also remember that in 1969 the film would have no doubt struck a chord with international viewers, reminding them of the conspiracies surrounding the assassinations of President John Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy in America. Meanwhile, French audiences drew comparisons with the conspiracy between the French and Moroccan authorities in the 1965 kidnapping and murder of the Moroccan opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka.<sup>15</sup> Costa-Gavras himself noted how the murder of Lambrakis had the perquisites of a conspiracy thriller: ‘it had all the classic elements of political conspiracy posed most clearly. It had police complicity, the disappearance of key witnesses and corruption in government.’<sup>16</sup>

*Z* addresses an important theme that the director has returned to throughout his career. The murder in the film is attributed ultimately to the military dictatorship in collusion with the United States, which is stationing missiles on Greek territory much to the fury of a significant number of the population, led by the Deputy. This reflects the fact that the real-life Lambrakis had opposed the presence of US missiles in Greece.<sup>17</sup> This is a particularly important point for this thesis because it points to one of the key features of the British conspiracy thriller, namely the anti-American sentiment. There are numerous occasions in *Z* when characters berate, harangue and denounce the Greek authorities for being ‘puppets of the USA’. In one scene at a rally, supporters of The Deputy cry ‘Disarmament’ while there is a counter cry of ‘Long live the bomb’ from pro-government forces. Elsewhere, *Z*’s supporters warn him that he is walking into a trap ‘by the CIA because we want the removal of foreign bases’.

This preoccupation with American imperialism runs through much of Costa-Gavras’ work. The director compared American practices such as this to the work of the early

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, 2015. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Michalzyk, J. *Costa-Gavras: The Political Fiction Film* USA: Assoc. University Presses, 1984. 92-93.

missionaries who were deployed in order to civilize and imperialise vulnerable nations and societies.<sup>18</sup> In *State of Siege* (1973), long-time Costa-Gavras collaborator Yves Montand plays Philip Santore (another fictional character based firmly in fact). This time Montand's character represents American AID (Agency for International Development) official Dan Mitrione who was stationed in Uruguay in 1969. The story uses flashbacks to depict Mitrione's kidnap and murder by the Uruguayan terrorist group, the Tupermaros. *State of Siege* was controversial for its partisan approach, depicting the Tupermaros as freedom-fighters against American imperialism, rather than as terrorists. Part of the reason for this was because the AID group for whom Mitrione/Santore worked was a front for right-wing counter insurgency with close links to the CIA. True to the spirit of the film's documentary style, Costa-Gavras and his co-writer Franco Solinas conducted exhaustive research into the lives and methods of the Tupermaros, but more particularly into the misdeeds of the United States in Uruguay, whose presence in Latin America was indicative of their attempts to fight the Cold War anywhere that might be deemed susceptible to communist influence.

Upon the release of *State of Siege* the film-makers also published the screenplay and included a substantial appendix of supporting 'reflections' and documents in an attempt to confirm their credentials and strengthen the anti-American case that they present on film. These documents included a speech by a Uruguayan Senator from July 1972 in which he denounced the presence of foreign experts (mentioning Mitrione by name). Another report details allegations of torture in Brazil by AID representatives.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the writers included documents relating to other Latin American nations once again reminds us of the intention to present a sense of universality. As was the case with *Z*, for Costa-Gavras *State of Siege* was an attempt to reveal the dubious conduct of American foreign policy to a mass audience whom he refers to as 'the silent majority', so that when watching the film they would not simply respond to the issue as a uniquely Uruguayan situation but would realise that American neo-colonialism was in fact systematic and

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<sup>18</sup> Kalishman, H. & Crowds, G. 'A film is like a match, you can make a big fire or nothing at all' *Cinéaste*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1973. 2-7

<sup>19</sup> Costa-Gavras, C. & Solinas, F. *State of Siege: Screenplay, Reflections and Documents* USA: Ballantine Books, 1973. 161 & 197.

endemic.<sup>20</sup> As Costa-Gavras put it himself, the film was reacting to ‘a universal condition - the manner in which the United States has played policeman to the rest of the world’.<sup>21</sup> It is for this reason that the director had initially intended to call the film *Amerikan*, an adjective adopted by left-wing revolutionaries to describe the aggressive nature of American intervention.<sup>22</sup>

In 1982's *Missing*, Costa-Gavras once again criticized the United States, this time over its involvement in Chile. The film tells the story of a father's search for his son who disappears in Chile during the *coup-d'état* under General Pinochet in 1973 which replaced the socialist government. As he had done with *Z* and *State of Siege*, Costa-Gavras shaped his political invective around a real-life context, this time that of American freelance journalist Charles Horman. The young journalist mysteriously became one of the infamous 20,000 so-called ‘disappeared’ during the coup. The efforts of Horman's father Ed (Jack Lemmon) to find his son are deliberately hampered by staff at the American embassy in Chile, who know more than they initially reveal, and are in collusion with Pinochet's forces for political gain.

Costa-Gavras was asked at the time why *Missing* did not specify at the start that the events took place in Chile. As with *Z*, the director believed that by providing that context ‘it becomes a local problem...these things are still happening. It could be Argentina; it could be El Salvador. People are disappearing all over the world.’<sup>23</sup> This provides further evidence of the way in which Costa-Gavras employs a specific, localized event in order to explore the universal theme of state corruption and duplicity. While the majority of mainstream audiences might have had little knowledge or interest in the political situation in Greece, Chile or Uruguay, Costa-Gavras uses those locations as a means of addressing wider anxieties about American interventionism. Furthermore, because the director's target audience was the ‘silent majority’ who were politically apathetic and oblivious to American practice, he deliberately fuses Third Cinema with First in order to convey his political message by stealth, as it were, adopting the dynamic conventions of the thriller

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kalishman, H. ‘State of Siege: Persuading the already persuaded’ *Cinéaste* Vol. 7, No. 2, 1974. 36-39.

<sup>22</sup> Shaw, 2015.108

<sup>23</sup> Rubenstein, L. & Crowds, G ‘The Missing Dossier’ *Cinéaste* Vol. 12, No.1, 1982. 30-38.

form. This reminds us of his tenet that ‘you don’t catch flies with vinegar’. This is the core principle that has been central to the director’s oeuvre: the necessity to compromise the purity of Third Cinema (like *The Battle of Algiers*) in order to communicate his message to a wider audience. After all, ‘a film which is not seen is a film which does not exist. Even more when we’re talking about a political film.’<sup>24</sup> As we shall see, the compromise between political and commercial interests is consistent across Costa-Gavras’ work, but has fuelled the disapproval of his detractors.

The issue of American imperialism is also relevant to the work of director Francesco Rosi. Though the Italian film-maker did not address the issue directly in his work, it is fundamental to the political context in which he was working. Unlike Costa-Gavras, who looked outward beyond French shores in order to present a global perspective, Rosi preferred to cast an introspective eye over his own Italian society. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why Rosi’s name is less well known internationally than that of Costa-Gavras. The film scholar John J. Michalczyk considers Rosi to be Costa-Gavras’s Italian counterpart, and this is certainly true in terms of his contribution to the European conspiracy thriller cycle.<sup>25</sup>

Just as in France, Italy witnessed a powerful rise of the left in the 1960s, particularly the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) which, by the 1970s, was garnering over 30% of the vote.<sup>26</sup> The following decade was beset by left-wing terrorist violence, with four hundred people dying as a result during the *anni di piombo* or ‘Years of Lead’, as the period has come to be known.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that although the violence at the time was deemed to be the work of left-wing radicals, there were suspicions that it was part of a strategy of state sanctioned terrorism developed by both domestic and foreign secret services as a means of stemming the popularity and influence of the burgeoning left. In more recent times, evidence has come to light that makes the case about state sanctioned terror more compelling. Para-political author and journalist Phillip Willan has provided evidence that

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<sup>24</sup> Smith, A. *French Cinema in the 1970s* UK: Manchester University Press, 2005. 62.

<sup>25</sup> Michalczyk, J. *The Italian Political Film-makers* USA: Associated University Presses Inc, 1986. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Hibbin, S. ‘Illustrious Corpses’ *The Movie Magazine*, Orbis, Issue 81, 1981.

<sup>27</sup> Duggan, C. *A Concise History of Italy* UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 269.

the United States was involved in attempting to stem the growth of Italian communism.<sup>28</sup> This fact highlights a noteworthy parallel to the fears of American imperialism which are present in much of Costa-Gavras' work.

Buchanan explains that the rationale behind such state sanctioned terror was that terrorism might be used as a means of manipulating public opinion through fear and provocation. This has come to be referred to as the *strategia della tensione* or 'strategy of tension'.<sup>29</sup> Those with a vested interest in seeing that the PCI did not come to power reasoned that acts of terror would increase the population's desire for security at the expense of social reform, or as Willan puts it 'destabilizing in order to stabilize'.<sup>30</sup> In recent times Italian magistrates have discovered details that demonstrate the role of the secret services, the armed forces and the conservative politicians who controlled them. Other prominent members of the Italian Establishment were also involved as a means of securing their status. Particular attention has fallen on Licio Gelli, Venerable Master of the Propaganda Two (or P2) secret masonic lodge, with a report published in 1984 suggesting that Gelli was influenced by the American secret services.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say however that America's intervention in Italian affairs was the sole factor contributing to the Years of Lead. Nevertheless, former CIA director William Colby has confirmed America's history of intervention in Italian political affairs, with Colby himself despatched to run a large scale covert action programme there. Thereafter, the Senate Committee on Intelligence deemed the activities undertaken by the United States in Italy to be unethical.<sup>32</sup> Here again the feature of American imperialism emerges, and although Rosi's work does not address it per se, the effect that it had on Italian society inevitably finds its way into the director's work.

This 'strategy of tension' influenced Francesco Rosi's strong sense of conviction about his role as a film-maker. Rosi believed that he was obliged 'to be a witness to the times', words that echo the sentiment of Costa-Gavras who saw his role as 'holding a mirror up

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<sup>28</sup> Willan, P. *Puppetmasters: The Political use of terrorism in Italy* USA: Authors Choice Press, 2002. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Buchanan, T. *Europe's Troubled Peace* UK: Blackwell, 2008. 183.

<sup>30</sup> Willan, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 20.

to society'.<sup>33</sup> Rather like Pontecorvo before him, Rosi believed that for too long the audience had been condescended to and that cinema had reached a point where much of the work being produced was so asinine as to be 'infantile' and ultimately disrespectful to audiences. Rosi told *Cineaste* that the audience must 'not just be passive spectators'.<sup>34</sup>

In Rosi's 1976 film *Illustrious Corpses*, Inspector Amerigo Rogas (Lino Ventura) probes the deaths of several high ranking officials. He discovers that the deceased have all been involved in unethical deals, and he soon unearths a wider culture of conspiracy at the highest levels of Italian society. Before Rogas can reveal the conspiracy, he is killed by the authorities who believe that it is better to conceal the truth so as not to provoke a revolution from which society might not recover. Upon release, *Illustrious Corpses* courted controversy for the way in which it presented respected organizations. Indeed the film was denounced by a Roman court in 1976 for its criticism of a government institution.<sup>35</sup> We have seen how Costa-Gavras' conspiracy films frequently avoid naming specific locations in order to create a sense of universality about them. So too here Rosi prefers to include non-specific references such as 'the capital' so that the audience comprehend that issues of conspiracy and corruption are pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Rosi explained that *Illustrious Corpses* was intended to be 'set in an imaginary country but which could be England...corruption exists everywhere'.<sup>37</sup>

Francesco Rosi insisted that the version of events he often presented in his films was 'one truth', explaining that in taking inspiration from real-life situations in Italian society, he believed that he was not free to 'invent but you can interpret'.<sup>38</sup> This is an approach fraught with problems, because it can result in the creation of 'faction', and the misinterpretation of fiction for fact.<sup>39</sup> The lines between fact and fiction become sufficiently nebulous so that the audience are unaware of where the truth ends and the

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<sup>33</sup> Michalzyk, 1986. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Crowds, G. & Georgakas, D. 'The Audience Should Not Be Just Passive Spectators: An Interview with Francesco Rosi' *Cineaste* vol.7, No.1, 1975. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Michalzyk, J., 1986. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Hibbin, S. 'Illustrious Corpses' *The Movie Magazine*, Orbis, Issue 81, 1981.

<sup>38</sup> Crowds, G. & Georgakas, D. 'The Audience Should Not Be Just Passive Spectators: An Interview with Francesco Rosi' *Cineaste* vol.7, No.1, 1975. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Wark, W. *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence* UK: Routledge, 1991. 3

realm of a film-maker's imagination begins. Despite such problems, British director David Drury admires this aspect of *Illustrious Corpses* particularly, believing that 'the job of drama is to find the emotional truth behind the facts'.<sup>40</sup> However the problem with this approach is that the conspiracy thrillers partially establish themselves as political comment. They seek to make a statement that holds a mirror up to society about state corruption. However, this political comment is undermined because emotional truth is not the same as factual truth, and films claiming to address political issues should arguably owe more to fact than to fiction. While engaging the emotions is a prerequisite of the mainstream thriller, it is also a manipulative approach that can hinder an intended political message. Rosi's belief that the film-maker is at liberty to 'interpret' means that the application of fact limits a film's ability to make an effective political statement. This is because the more discerning audience member is naturally mistrustful of the film-maker's efforts to manipulate and will adopt a more guarded approach to the film. Despite qualms about Rosi's manipulation of fact and fiction, film critic Richard Combs' review of *Illustrious Corpses* concludes that the film does not provide enough 'realistic grit for the conspiracy theory that Rosi intends'.<sup>41</sup> Combs' believes that Rosi's vision of an Orwellian dystopia, depicting all-pervasive methods of state surveillance, is excessive and unrealistic, and therefore undermines any attempt to make effective political comment.

As we have seen with the Hollywood conspiracy films, one of the most important aspects of Rosi's film is his depiction of the urban environment and the way in which he uses it to act as a metaphor for the message about Man's relationship with the state. Irrespective of their origin, the conspiracy thrillers employ setting as a means of presenting the theme of conspiracy. *Illustrious Corpses* is no exception and the film is full of baroque features and uses interior and exterior locations to establish the tension between those in power and the general population. For example, when Rogas is threatened by an Italian minister, Rosi makes deliberate use of long shots for the benefit of the viewer to fully appreciate the trappings of power. The chamber's baroque features convey a strong sense of wealth, tradition and permanence. The oak panelling, extensive artworks, abundance of precious metals and cut glass; these details are 'intended as the signifiers of male power...a

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<sup>40</sup> Drury, D. Interview with the author, May 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Combs, R. 'Illustrious Corpses' *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Jan 1, 1977. 119.

taxonomy of indicators of status and control'.<sup>42</sup> This can also be found in *Z*. When investigating magistrate Jean Louis Trintignant slowly edges nearer to the truth about the corruption at high levels that underpins the assassination, he is called before the Attorney General in the baroque setting of his drawing room, complete with crystal decanter, high ceilings, large fireplace and mantle as well as numerous works of art. These features are intended to overwhelm and intimidate and it is within this setting that he is warned that reaching the 'wrong' conclusion 'could break your career'.

Setting is also used as a means of communicating the theme of conspiracy in *State of Siege*. As we can see in the screenplay, the American Embassy is described as 'an austere, modern construction of reinforced concrete – a sort of fortress.' This emphasizes what the film attempts to depict about the ways in which America is the aggressor.<sup>43</sup> Costa-Gavras' deliberate description of the building as a 'fortress' is a perfect metaphor: a physical representation of the powerful and intimidating presence of the United States in relation to weaker, subservient nations. This also reminds us of the way in which Pakula and his director of photography Gordon Willis present the state buildings in Washington in *All the President's Men* (1976). The government district is filmed frequently using low angle long shots so as to appear as threatening monoliths looming over the hero, demonstrating how the characters are dwarfed by the leviathan power structures. This is reminiscent of the way in which Pakula films the offices of the Parallax Corporation, with a wide-angle shot used to show the protagonist dwarfed against the enormous façade of reflective glass that prevent Frady and the audience from peering within and gaining insight.

Rosi uses similar techniques so that institutional buildings represent the themes of state corruption in *Illustrious Corpses*. A central motif in *Illustrious Corpses* is the panopticon, a concept designed by social reformer and philosopher Jeremy Bentham in order to comprehensively observe prison inmates by the least number of guards. Mary Wood's research into Italian cinema has drawn attention to the way in which Rosi's work seems indelibly influenced by the principles of the panopticon because of the way his film

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<sup>42</sup> Wood, M. 'Revealing the Hidden City: The cinematic conspiracy thriller of the 1970s' *The Italianist* No. 1, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Costa-Gavras, C. & Solinas, F. 125.

demonstrates how surveillance is fundamental to the systems of power and control of the population.<sup>44</sup> In *Illustrious Corpses* the systems of surveillance are reflected in the police centre with its extensive array of CCTV screens. The audience is encouraged to consider the myriad ways that the state is watching. Just like Costa-Gavras' depiction of the American Embassy in *State of Siege*, Rosi depicts institutional spaces 'as similarly grey and uncommunicative'.<sup>45</sup> The grey and uncommunicative quality referred to here aptly reflects the way in which the conspiracy thrillers of Europe, America and Britain all present the uniformity of the state, its inflexibility and austerity. The bureaucrats who inhabit these spaces are faceless automatons constantly monitoring and controlling the population and it is in this way that we might consider the nation itself transformed into a kind of panopticon: we see consistently in the conspiracy thriller that the security services are acutely aware of the actions of the protagonist, without the protagonist himself having any knowledge that he is being observed.

As well as their use of setting, both Costa-Gavras and Rosi use characterisation as a means of communicating the theme of conspiracy. Given the fervent political messages that frequently emerge in the European conspiracy thrillers, it might seem odd that Costa-Gavras 'did not want to make a political film...the major plea in *Z* is not in favour of a party but in favour of a man,'<sup>46</sup> but these remarks help us to appreciate how both directors used human drama in order to convey a political message. Specifically we will see how carefully-constructed, empathetic leading characters were used as a means of serving the political message of their films.

The first way in which this is achieved is through the presence of popular and critically leading actors. Firstly, on a commercial level, the use of well-established leading men significantly helps the film-makers to find a mainstream audience who might otherwise be averse to the idea of watching a film about politics. The leading men in the films here all possess the same central qualities that are recurring features of the hero of the conspiracy thriller. The protagonist should be an everyman: noble at heart and readily

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<sup>44</sup> Wood, M. 2013

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Petley, J. 'Costa-Gavras' *The Movie Magazine*, Issue 81, 1981.

identifiable with the audience as ‘one of us’. Rosi’s leading man in *Illustrious Corpses* is Lino Ventura, an Italian actor who enjoyed a lengthy and respected career playing tough yet often vulnerable detectives. Ventura exploited his somewhat lugubrious features to establish a successful on-screen persona as a determined, empathic and sympathetic hero. Given his age (57 during *Illustrious Corpses*) he was typical of the older leading man that these films frequently demand, eschewing the vitality and impetuosity that befits young action heroes. The hero of the conspiracy thriller often has long-held beliefs about society and the decency of the state. This means that when he does finally learn the truth about the falsehoods on which his own ideals and principals have been built, it makes the revelations all the more tragic. British film-maker David Drury would later take inspiration from this characterisation, believing that a vital aspect of *Illustrious Corpses* was that it took a political position but ‘pinned it on characters who were in crisis.’<sup>47</sup> For Drury the characterization, far from being a distraction to political comment, was the most effective means by which political comment can be made in mainstream cinema. He would later embrace this kind of characterization in his own work.

In two of Costa-Gavras’ films the hero is played by Yves Montand. The French singer and actor was 48 when he appeared in *Z*, and 53 in *State of Siege*. What is particularly noteworthy about Montand’s presence in the films is his well-known affiliations with the *Partie Communiste Francais*, which imbues his role as the communist politician in *Z* with a greater degree of credibility.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, in *State of Siege* he plays the villainous Santore/Mitrione character that represents the nefarious American influence in Uruguay. His choice for this latter role is surprising given the actor’s reputation and the romantic Gallic charm evident in his music. Yet these very qualities help to deepen the performance and present Santore as less of a clichéd villain (even though ultimately one is left in little doubt that we are encouraged to sympathise with his opponents). The opposing forces of America and the Tupermaros are explored in the film through dialectic; with Santore/Mitrione having to justify his ideological position against that of his captors. These scenes serve to heighten the political dimension of the film but also result in a final evaluation of the Santore/Mitrione character that is reminiscent of other

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<sup>47</sup> Drury, D. Interview with the author, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2015

<sup>48</sup> Smith, A. *French Cinema in the 1970s* UK: Manchester University Press, 2005. 39.

antagonists of the conspiracy thrillers. Presented as bureaucratic automatons we are rarely encouraged to sympathise with such men, but all try to vindicate their conspiratorial actions in ideological terms, justifying the difficult decisions they take as pragmatic given the Cold War context: all roads lead back to global fight against communism. In this capacity *State of Siege* differs from some of the other conspiracy thrillers such as *The Parallax View* because the antagonist is more nuanced, with Santore/Mitrione given a more sympathetic quality than the shadowy figures that lurk in the backgrounds of other conspiracy thrillers. Although Costa-Gavras' affiliations and political leanings are very clear, the Mitrione/Santore character is at least given screen time and dialogue that develop him from a one-dimensional villain.

In *Missing*, Jack Lemmon plays the lead. Aged 53 when he took on the role (earning him the Best Actor award at Cannes in 1983), Ed Horman is also in the mould of the classic protagonist: he begins the film as unhesitatingly patriotic and obedient to authority. There is quite deliberately an element of Horman 'in all of you', Costa-Gavras told a press conference upon the film's release.<sup>49</sup> He meant by this that Lemmon's character epitomises the commonly held attitudes that the film director was characteristically eager to challenge. Horman's perspective is consistently tested throughout the film and as the US Ambassador in Chile tells him the only reason why Horman cares about American misdeeds is because it has come to affect him personally. Gibney reminds us that 'Absent of this....Horman would be at home championing the removal of a socialist government by whatever means necessary'.<sup>50</sup> The Ambassador's rebuke is typical of the way in which the adversaries in the conspiracy thriller act pragmatically. (This reminds us of the CIA Chief's rebuke in *Three Days of the Condor* that most Americans are content to be oblivious to the conduct of the security services as long as their interests are protected.) The Ambassador has recalibrated his moral compass in order to do his job effectively; decisions are made with innocent victims becoming collateral damage, the inevitable casualties of war. Unlike Santore/Mitrione however the Americans are less sympathetic in *Missing*. The Ambassador initially appears compassionate until it is clear that he and other high ranking officials are - typically of those in the genre - duplicitous. The director

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<sup>49</sup> Rubenstein, L. & Crowds, G. 'The Missing Dossier' *Cinéaste*, Vol.12, No.1, 1982. 30-38.

<sup>50</sup> Gibney, M. *Watching Human Rights: The 101 Best Films* Routledge, 2015. 22-23.

concluded that such characters ‘are not basically cruel men...they have their duty – a duty dictated by their government.’<sup>51</sup> Film scholar Michael Selig argues that the preoccupation with heroes and villains ties a film’s narrative to fictional personalities rather than social processes, which should ultimately be the aim of a political film.<sup>52</sup> This is an important point because while the presentation of the richly drawn characters like Ed Horman might offer a more nuanced approach to characterisation than is found in other mainstream thrillers, it is still reductive: rather than offering a wider political comment of the issues of American imperialism, the film is arguably reduced to depicting the struggle of one family against the state. Similarly, despite Costa-Gavras’ comment that the antagonists in *Missing* are ‘basically not cruel men’, he provides little time for their character development so that in contrast to Lemmon’s heartrending portrayal of Horman they are reduced to being the bureaucratic automatons that are indicative of the genre.

Such facts inevitably lead us back to the question of how best to make a political point within mainstream conventions? Should film-makers focus on a generalized presentation in order to give a global sense of political events, or should they focus on the specific – an individual or family – and risk presenting the problem as a personal struggle rather than an endemic political one? Wayne cites this as a persistent problem that arises when film-makers adopt First Cinema approaches to Third Cinema potential.<sup>53</sup> It is also reminiscent of the criticism by others who see the conspiracy thriller as fundamentally flawed for presenting the ‘sports fan’s view’ of the issues: interpersonal relations are foregrounded rather than the wider social and political issues.<sup>54</sup> So for critics like John Hill the subordination of political polemic to character fundamentally undermines any purposeful political message.<sup>55</sup>

The legacy of the European conspiracy thriller is worth exploring because it has been both praised and criticised by scholars. For some, Costa-Gavras and Rosi created a new

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<sup>51</sup> Michalczyk, 1984. 229.

<sup>52</sup> Selig, M. ‘Conflict and Contradiction in the Mass Media’ *Jump Cut*, No. 30, March 1985. 19-21.

<sup>53</sup> Wayne, 138.

<sup>54</sup> Hill, J. *British Cinema in the 1980s* UK: Clarendon Press, 1999. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Albert, M. ‘Conspiracy? ...NOT!’ *Z Magazine*, January 1992. 17-19.

mainstream genre, while for others they simply ‘injected some leftist, anti-Establishment politics into an existing genre such as *film noir*’.<sup>56</sup> The work of both men has been credited with influencing both the Hollywood cycle and British cycles.<sup>57</sup> Richard Combs’ review of *Illustrious Corpses* compares the film with *The Parallax View* and *All the President’s Men*, concluding that it has the stylistic force of the former but not the factual depth and detail of the latter.<sup>58</sup> The conspiracy thriller genre has its detractors like Peter Biskind who feel particularly that when it comes to engaging with politics the films do not go far enough.<sup>59</sup> This problem is in part the legacy of the success of *Z*. One of the negative results of the film’s accomplishment was the emergence of what came to be dubbed the *serie-Z* in France. The term came to reflect the fact that in its wake *Z* prompted a slew of second-rate pedestrian thrillers that laboriously tagged on a political message in attempt to appear relevant and reflective. While *Z* paved the way for a number of respected, politically motivated mainstream conspiracy films, their torch burned brightly but briefly, and soon directors who lacked the insight or skill of Costa-Gavras were attempting in vain to bottle the kind of lightning at the box office that *Z* had done in 1969. The sheer abundance of films in the conspiracy thriller style diluted the quality of what had preceded them and resulted in the genre as a whole being deemed ‘ideologically fuzzy’.<sup>60</sup>

What Costa-Gavras and Rosi wrestled with was striking the balance between a meaningful political message whilst also ‘sugar coating the pill’ to make it attractive to audiences.<sup>61</sup> These film-makers recognised that political cinema, while being noble and earnest, runs the risk languishing unseen by mainstream audiences. As Boisset noted, ‘the only really effective censorship still exists and it is stronger than ever: that is economic censorship.’<sup>62</sup> What good is a ‘message’ film that audiences do not pay to see? The dilemma was how to balance the ‘sugar coating’ with the more meaningful and Brechtian device of alienating the audience in an attempt to make them think rather than feel.<sup>63</sup> A good example is how, within the opening five minutes of *State of Siege*, Costa-Gavras

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<sup>56</sup> Michalzyk, 1984, 48.

<sup>57</sup> For examples see; Pratt, 2001 as well as Michalzyk, 1984.

<sup>58</sup> Combs, R. ‘Illustrious Corpses’ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Jan 1, 1977. 119.

<sup>59</sup> Biskind, P. ‘State of Siege’. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No.1, Autumn 1973. 51-54.

<sup>60</sup> Hennebelle, G. ‘Z movies or What hath Costa-Gavras wrought?’ *Cinéaste*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1974. 28-31.

<sup>61</sup> Monaco, J. ‘The Costa-Gavras Syndrome’ *Cinéaste*, Vol. 7, No. 2 Spring 1976, 18-21.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Monaco, J. ‘The Costa-Gavras Syndrome’ *Cinéaste*, Vol. 7, No. 2 Spring 1976, 18-21.

reveals to his audience that the Santore/Mitrione character is dead. In doing so, the director forces the audience to focus less on the thriller aspects of the plot (a race against time for the authorities to find the man and foil the terrorists) and more on the political message; exploring the ethical issues of United States intervention in Uruguay. The work of Costa-Gavras and Rosi does not shy from leaving the audience reeling so that they are far from being passive spectators. With the addition of sombre and reflective conclusions, the film-makers demonstrate that they are not pandering to mainstream conventions. Conclusions like that of *Illustrious Corpses*, where the hero is killed, the truth concealed and the conspiracy perpetuated, deny the audience satisfaction but in so doing force reflection and debate.

Despite the perpetual criticisms of the genre, Costa-Gavras and Rosi delivered what they set out achieve with these films: enlightenment of the 'silent majority', and while the depth and scope of their political messages may not be as weighty as Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, they do give pause for thought to mainstream audiences.<sup>64</sup> There is no guarantee that radical political cinema will provoke its desired radical response, even if it finds an audience. Pontecorvo was obliged to work outside the mainstream conventions of film production so that he could adopt techniques which would challenge his audience and present an arresting message. Wayne reminds us that it is a rarity for a film that emerges from the myriad constraints of mainstream cinema to be regarded as Third Cinema.<sup>65</sup> However, what emerged in the wake of *The Battle of Algiers* was a number of films that attempted to mimic the success of Pontecorvo's film by seeking to adopt a clear political stance through neorealist techniques, and to achieve this while working within the confines of mainstream cinema. For many critics, such attempts are oxymoronic because of the difficulties of addressing politics in a truly serious way within the confines of popular entertainment. Though Costa-Gavras, Rosi and the other conspiracy thriller film-makers did not set out to create examples of Third Cinema, they did attempt to make a serious political message within First Cinema traditions. This compromise however has been criticised, with detractors finding the dichotomy of this approach to be a fundamental flaw. This is an issue that will emerge again in subsequent

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<sup>64</sup> Kalishman, H. 'State of Siege: Persuading the already persuaded' *Cinéaste* Vol. 7, No. 2, 1974. 36-39.

<sup>65</sup> Wayne, 48.

chapters. The issue for Costa-Gavras however was clear: ‘You don’t catch flies with vinegar’, he once said: for him, the inclusion of a political dimension necessitated the use of mainstream conventions as a means of making the political message more palatable for a wider audience.<sup>66</sup>

We would do well to remember the *raison d’être* of these film-makers: neither wanted their audience to be passive spectators, and if the responses that *Z*, *State of Siege*, *Missing* and *Illustrious Corpses* garnered are anything to go by, then the film-makers achieved their objective. *Z* defied all expectations and bucked the notion that political films were ‘box office poison’, becoming the 4<sup>th</sup> highest grossing film in France that year.<sup>67</sup> It went on to earn international acclaim, winning the Palme d’Or at Cannes before earning a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. *State of Siege* was nominated for the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film and won the United Nations Award at BAFTA. Perhaps more importantly for Costa-Gavras, those in the US government who vociferously denounced *State of Siege* on its release were silenced in the latter part of the decade when evidence came to light about the scale of American involvement in Latin America. Thereafter, *Missing* earned two Academy Awards and another two nominations as well as the Palme D’Or. The film itself was withdrawn in the United States pending the result of a court case against the director by the former US Ambassador to Chile for defamation of character. Costa-Gavras won his case and the awards followed closely behind. *Illustrious Corpses* won five awards including a Golden Globe for Best Picture. In addition the film gained interest in Italy following its denunciation by an Italian court in April 1976.

Perhaps these political film-makers would hesitate at measuring success in terms of awards, but what these details demonstrate is that the films achieved a number of objectives. They were critically and commercially successful, meaning the film-makers could justifiably claim that the messages had reached their mainstream audience. Secondly, the success of each film accrued each director a certain reputation that enabled them to undertake subsequent political projects. Finally, they achieved significant

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<sup>66</sup> Hennebelle, G. ‘Z movies or What hath Costa-Gavras wrought?’ *Cinéaste*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1974. 28-31.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

political outcomes, with each film provoking a response from within the corridors of power. In this respect the European films can claim to have been far more effective than their British and American counterparts.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> A notable exception in the American cycle being Pakula's *All the President's Men* in 1976, though arguably this film basked in the glow of the Pulitzer Prize winning book that preceded it.

## Chapter Three

### The Influence of John le Carré on the British Conspiracy Thrillers

This chapter will examine the impact of John le Carré's work on the British conspiracy thriller films. Specifically, it is my intention to demonstrate how the author's recurring exploration of the themes of loyalty and betrayal, as well as his use of setting, are features that significantly influenced the way in which British film-makers presented the secret state in television and on film during the 1980s. Reviews and articles about the British conspiracy films and television programmes frequently include le Carré's name in connection with the genre. What critics seem to agree on is that le Carré re-defined the British spy story during the Cold War period. Though he is often considered to be the successor to Graham Greene, I would argue that Greene's novels have not had the same impact as that of le Carré on shaping the conspiracy genre on television and in the cinema. Le Carré is associated exclusively with the espionage genre but it is important to clarify that the boundaries between the conspiracy thriller and the espionage novel are nebulous. Steve Neale reminds us that the thriller genre is particularly prone to 'hybridizing'.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the British case studies central to this thesis cannot be collectively termed espionage films, while many of the novels of le Carré might be called conspiracy thrillers. This chapter is not concerned with the issue of taxonomy, but with the way in which certain characteristics of le Carré's literary style have impacted on the three British conspiracy thrillers explored in later chapters.

To date, John le Carré has written twenty-three novels. Of that number, fifteen have been made into film or television productions. Though there is an abundance of work that has been written about le Carré's literary style, much less exists about the film and television adaptations of his books. This chapter considers some of the stylistic features of the screen adaptations that have been influential on the British case studies: subtle tension, methodical pacing, complex plotting and characterisation. These are the features that have both attracted and repelled critics and audiences over the years to screen

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<sup>1</sup> Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood USA*: Routledge, 2000. 83

adaptations of le Carré's novels. The BAFTA award-winning BBC productions of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and *Smiley's People* continue to be lauded as defining moments in television history, while George Roy Hill's *The Little Drummer Girl* was largely dismissed by critics, including *The New York Times* which concluded that it was 'more breathless than breath-taking'.<sup>2</sup> The criticisms levelled at the screen adaptations of le Carré's work have also been directed at the British case studies.

John le Carré's influence on screen reached its apex with the highly acclaimed BBC television productions of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (Hopcraft) in 1979 and *Smiley's People* (Langton) in 1983. Simon Langton's work on the latter resulted in him being recruited to direct *The Whistle Blower* four years later. As Langton has acknowledged, he was approached for the film precisely because the producers intended it to be in the le Carré vein.<sup>3</sup> As such, the more 'le Carré-esque' qualities of John Hale's original source novel were enhanced by screenwriter Julian Bond. Bond himself had been a contemporary of le Carré's at Sherbourne School and had also been hired to write an adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* for London Weekend Television in the mid-1970s.<sup>4</sup> The success of the early BBC adaptations and then *A Perfect Spy* (Hopcraft) in 1987 meant that *The Whistle Blower* was adapted for the screen with the deliberate intention of attracting le Carré's television audience to the cinema. John MacKenzie, director of *The Fourth Protocol*, was originally recruited to direct the BBC adaptation of *Smiley's People*, and such details remind us of the interwoven lineage between le Carré's work and the British conspiracy thrillers.

An obvious starting point for exploring le Carré's influence is the way in which his style deviated from the conventions of the spy narrative that had become embedded by the late 1950s. His Cold War novels are infused with the sense of anxiety that was indicative of the period immediately following defining moments such as the creation of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year. Le Carré explained that *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was written as a response to the 'political disgust' he felt

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<sup>2</sup> Canby, V. 'Little Drummer Girl' *New York Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1984.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9403E4DF1439F93AA25753C1A962948260>>

<sup>3</sup> Langton, S. Interview with the author, February 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Sisman, A. *John le Carré* UK: Bloomsbury, 2015. 394.

following the events in Berlin.<sup>5</sup> However, despite capturing the geopolitical zeitgeist, le Carré's work does much more than explore international politics. His fictional world is a metaphor for the real world of human relationships; le Carré's recurring themes are those of loyalty and betrayal. As he told Melvyn Bragg in 1976, 'I think all of us live partly in a clandestine situation. In relation to our families, our wives, our children, we frequently affect attitudes to which we subscribe intellectually but not emotionally.'<sup>6</sup> Le Carré uses the secret state as a means of exploring the human condition, and this has elevated much of his work above the perceived constraints of populist fiction to which the spy thriller is frequently relegated. All too often the genre is deemed insubstantial and the stuff of mere escapism, while Philip Roth declared le Carré's 1986 semi-autobiographical novel *A Perfect Spy* 'the greatest British novel since the war'.

To many members of the public the spy genre of the late 1950s and early 1960s was epitomised by 007. For le Carré however Ian Fleming's urbane hero was an anathema: 'I despise Bond. I despise the short answer in the perfectly made world',<sup>7</sup> and le Carré's work is very much the antithesis of Fleming's. Rather than the black and white of James Bond's universe, le Carré's is perpetually grey: the depictions of his urban settings are often bathed in a grey hue that acts as a metaphor for the lives of the characters and the moral bankruptcy of the state. Of course, Fleming's hero was never intended to reflect reality, and if Fleming was a purveyor of escapism, then le Carré's fictions allow anything but escape. Critics universally agree that they leave the reader with lingering doubts, anxieties and questions about society that reflect le Carré's own doubts and anxieties of the world around him. Unlike the jingoistic spy novels that preceded them, a moral ambiguity is central to le Carré's work which is also indicative of the conspiracy genre as a whole. The author made this point in an interview for *The Listener* in 1979: 'We are in the process of doing things in defence of our society which may very well produce a society which is not worth defending; we're constantly asking ourselves what is the price we can pay in order to preserve a society, yet what sort of society is preservable?'<sup>8</sup> His

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<sup>5</sup> Le Carré, J. 'I was a secret even to myself' 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 'The Spy Who Came in from the Cold' *The Guardian* 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/12/john-le-carre-spy-anniversary>>

<sup>6</sup> Sisman, 2015. 383.

<sup>7</sup> Bruccoli, M. & Baughman, J. (Ed) *Conversations with John le Carré* USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.13.

<sup>8</sup> Vaughan, Paul. 'Le Carré's Circus: Lamplighters, Moles, and Others of That ilk' *The Listener* 13, 1979: 340.

comments here resonate with comments we have seen elsewhere: John Frankenheimer, Robert Redford and Costa-Gavras all articulated the same idea when discussing the motivation behind their conspiracy thrillers.

Raymond Williams uses the terms 'literature *in* society' and 'literature *and* society' as a means of looking at thrillers in two ways: as a form of cultural production within 20<sup>th</sup>-century British society, and then also exploring them as symptoms, representations or productions of themes and currents within 20<sup>th</sup>-century British culture.<sup>9</sup> With Williams' terms in mind, we can approach le Carré with a clearer understanding of his influence on the spy genre. In numerous interviews from the period immediately after *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (his third publication and an instant bestseller that brought him international acclaim), interviewers suggested that he had created the 'anti-Bond' in the central character of Alec Leamas. Le Carré pointed out that he was not deliberately doing so but that his intention was to write from his own experience in MI6 during the late 1950s and early 1960s. During that time, le Carré – working under his real name, David Cornwell - worked as the Second Secretary in the British Embassy in Bonn. This role was a cover for his real work as an MI6 case officer. As a result of his experience in the secret service, his novels have famously achieved an almost mythic status because they are deemed to be what intelligence historian Wesley Wark dubs 'faction': the careful blurring of fact and fiction.<sup>10</sup> The books are invested with a perceived authenticity which results in their being regarded as spy handbooks, or inside guides to the intelligence communities, informed by the author's own privileged knowledge of the security services. Le Carré himself has refuted claims about the veracity of his work, though he has done so in such an enigmatic way that rumours persist to this day.<sup>11</sup> A cynic might claim that rumours of the author's inside knowledge also buoy retail sales of his work, so that he does not try too hard to dispel theories about his continued access to the intelligence communities. Though Bruce Merry argues that spy thrillers are not mimetic, this is precisely a reason for le Carré's popularity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Denning, M. *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller*. UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.4.

<sup>10</sup> Wark, W. *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence* UK: Routledge, 1991. 3.

<sup>11</sup> John le Carré in conversation with Phillippe Sands. Hay Festival 2013, Friday 31 May 2013.

< <https://www.hayfestival.com/p-5496-john-le-carre.aspx> >

<sup>12</sup> Denning, 1987. 27.

Much of the public's enjoyment of le Carré's work has derived from the peculiar idiosyncrasies, the jargon, the convoluted acronyms and the espionage tradecraft that he writes about. It is these features that give his work the sense of 'ultra-realism'.<sup>13</sup> The reader feels complicit in the secret world; we are sharing secrets with le Carré and we too are privy to the inner workings of the secret state. Le Carré's biographer Adam Sisman believes that such details 'accentuate the sense of verisimilitude, giving the reader the impression that he or she is being admitted into a secret society with its own private lexicon.'<sup>14</sup> Le Carré has attributed his appeal to the fact that 'the secret world is intoxicating' for the public.<sup>15</sup> However it is interesting to note that one former senior figure in MI6 who is critical of the author's depiction of the secret state argues that it 'is not intoxicating to those on the inside. The idea of this certain brotherhood is certainly intoxicating to those on the outside...Le Carré is a victim of the intoxication *par excellence*; he has after all made his literary career out of it. John le Carré has been utterly beguiled by it.'<sup>16</sup> The sense of intoxication helps us to understand why audiences are susceptible to le Carré's powers of suggestion when it comes to fiction. We are willing to submit to the world that the author creates and to suspend our disbelief.

Le Carré's literary style is, intentionally or not, the antidote to the exuberance, glamour and escapism of James Bond. Alec Leamas is no super spy. At one point the character asks 'what do you think spies are: priests, saints and martyrs? They're a squalid profession of vain fools, traitors, too yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives'.<sup>17</sup> This quotation captures the essence of the le Carré style: a pared-down, terse and cynical view of the intelligence world. His presentation of spies in this way means that his work has less in common with many other spy thrillers and more to do with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Bildungsroman*, as political scientist Myron Aronoff explains.<sup>18</sup> The plot represents the protagonist's

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Sisman, 2015. 201.

<sup>15</sup> John le Carré in conversation with Phillippe Sands. Hay Festival 2013, Friday 31 May 2013. < <https://www.hayfestival.com/p-5496-john-le-carre.aspx> >

<sup>16</sup> Senior SIS Officer (Retired). Interview with the author, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Le Carré, J. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* UK: Sceptre, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Aronoff, Myron J. *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics* UK: St. Martin's, 1999. 108.

journey of self-discovery, an education in which the central character undergoes an irrevocable change as a result of what he comes to learn about the expediency of the secret state. Like the central characters in the conspiracy thrillers, many of the author's protagonists come to the realization that the world in which they had placed their trust is, in fact, morally bankrupt. A prime example of this is *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, in which the spy Alec Leamas is little more than a pawn in the espionage games of senior Whitehall figures. The audience share his ignorance until the end of the film, when he realises that he has been duped by his superiors. In the film version, Richard Burton portrays Leamas as an embittered alcoholic, who personifies the loss of autonomy and the sense that we are controlled and manipulated by others, that was, according to writers like Timothy Melley, endemic at this time. We have already explored how Melley believes that the adoption of conspiracy as a form in American literature was a means of coming to terms with a national sense of agency panic.<sup>19</sup> We can see evidence of this in le Carré's novel when Leamas 'finally realises... how he has been fooled, manipulated and misinformed to bring about a conclusion that was the opposite of the one he thought he was colluding in.'<sup>20</sup> What Melley refers to in the American conspiracy texts is exactly what le Carré and others explore: once familiar, trusted institutions are revealed as nefarious conspirators. Frequently the conspirators try to justify their actions as pragmatic but this makes them indistinguishable from their enemy. Whether East or West, the practice is the same, and as Leamas is told in the film of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (with dialogue paraphrased from the novel): 'Our policies are peaceful but our methods can't afford to be less aggressive than the opposition.'<sup>21</sup>

Martin Ritt's screen version of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was released in 1965, a year after Eon Productions' third 007 adaptation, *Goldfinger*. By that time the James Bond franchise was the model by which all spy films would be measured. Ironically, despite the films being poles apart in their portrayal of the intelligence services, both screenplays were written by Paul Dehn (who would also adapt le Carré's *A Call for the Dead* as *A Deadly Affair* in 1966). *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* won three BAFTA awards for

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<sup>19</sup> Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America*. USA: Cornell University Press, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Boyd, W. 'Re-reading The Spy Who Came in from the Cold' *The Guardian*, July 24th 2010.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jul/24/carre-spy-came-cold-boyd/print>>

<sup>21</sup> Le Carré, J. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* UK: Sceptre, 2009.18.

Best Film, Best Actor and Best Screenplay. The colourful and exotic locations of *Goldfinger* are eschewed in favour of black and white photography which emphasises not only the gloom of rain-soaked Berlin, but also the metaphorical grey ethical world of Cold War espionage. Ritt also depicts a seamier side of London, filled with run-down tenements and seedy nightclubs. Bond's world of glamour and sophistication is entirely at odds with every scene in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Ritt's film drew its tone and style from the original source material that would influence film-makers trying to capture the same sense of disillusionment in later adaptations of le Carré's work, as well as other conspiracy thrillers.

A distrust of the secret state is a recurring theme we find in le Carré's novels. However, for cultural historian Paul Gilroy the author's cynicism captures a feeling of 'colonial melancholia' in particular.<sup>22</sup> For Gilroy this describes the sense of loss of British character, the notion that British glory was a thing of the past and that the 'future is American.'<sup>23</sup> In le Carré's work, the immorality of the conduct of the secret state, its expediency and willingness to sacrifice its principles, were indicative of successive British governments' desperation to secure American support. Le Carré dubs the Americans 'the cousins' in his spy jargon and their presence is felt across most of his novels, particularly in the Smiley Trilogy. Le Carré's criticism of the American security services was made clear in an interview with *The Washington Post* during an interview to promote *The Honorable Schoolboy* in 1977. Le Carré explained that in America 'there are the grey men, who should be feeding computers with information from satellites. These are the figures one saw around the edges of the Vietnam War, who had all sorts of pretty words for 'kill'. They're scary'.<sup>24</sup> It is essential to clarify that any anti-American sentiment in le Carré's Smiley novels is simmering beneath the surface and is less overt and aggressive than we have explored in the films of Costa-Gavras.

For le Carré, blame is apportioned as much to the passive British submissiveness that is driven by a desperate bid to gain American support in military and intelligence affairs.

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<sup>22</sup> Fisher, M. 'The Smiley Factor' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2, Winter 2011. 37- 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Bruccoli & Baughman, 2004. 45.

Intelligence historian James Rusbridger reminds us that during the early 1980s there was a feeling of a lack of sovereignty in relinquishing military power to the Americans that was reflected in the prominence of USAF bases on UK soil at that time. In adopting le Carré's jargon, Rusbridger states that there was a 'resistance to the passing of the mantle of leadership from Britain to 'the cousins' in North America'.<sup>25</sup> Le Carré returned to the issue of the way in which British interests were subordinated to those of America, when he told *The Observer* in 1980 that, 'I don't think the British people are aware of the extent to which we are harnessed to the anti-communist effort. Perhaps Mrs Thatcher is making us more aware of it.'<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to note that le Carré considered that the British might be 'becoming more aware of it' and it is true that public awareness was raised by press coverage about the stationing of Pershing and Cruise missiles in Britain, as well as the number of whistle-blowers who were emerging from within the secret state to air their concerns about how the intelligence communities were implementing draconian measures in the name of national security. Clive Ponting, Sarah Tisdall, Cathy Massiter and Peter Wright were figures whose revelations in the press would fuel the sense of disquiet that was shared not only by le Carré but by the film makers of the British conspiracy thrillers. As we shall see in later chapters, le Carré inadvertently helped the film makers to find a stylistic means of expressing their concerns.

The anti-American sentiment was also cited as the motivation behind some of Britain's most infamous cases of betrayal, a theme with which le Carré admits having a preoccupation. According to Rusbridger, the Cambridge spy Kim Philby was motivated as much by an anti-American sentiment as by any communist conviction because 'the strain of giving over such transcendent power and influence to the great, unwashed American masses was too much for some of Philby's generation of elite Britishers to bear'.<sup>27</sup> In addition, we find that in the 1970s and 1980s Geoffrey Prime and Michael Bettany also attributed their treachery to anti-American feeling.

For le Carré, the issue of betrayal is all-pervasive. In his novels this theme is explored on a national level through acts of treason, as well as on a more personal level through

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<sup>25</sup> Rusbridger, J. *The Intelligence Game: Illusions & Delusions of International Espionage* UK: I.B.Taurus & Co Ltd, 1991. 33

<sup>26</sup> Bruccoli & Baughman, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Rusbridger, 1991.120.

infidelity in marriage. The British conspiracy thrillers tend towards the former, exploiting the contemporary interest in the ‘cover stories’ of the day that reported treason from within the secret services.<sup>28</sup> The public’s fascination with such treachery was long-established with a steady stream of traitors all making headlines into the 1980s. These cases are explored in Chapter Four. In light of the high-profile spy stories it is little wonder that Wesley Wark believes that the British have a ‘mild obsession’ with the theme of espionage, crediting the British with initiating the most significant innovations in the genre over the years.<sup>29</sup> The obsession that Wark notes was certainly reinvigorated by the spy scandals of the 1980s, but le Carré’s own interest in the theme of treachery, treason and betrayal is due in large part to the legacy of the Cambridge Spies.

The Cambridge Spies were Establishment figures, and to use Jon Snyder’s principle, spy films are anti-Establishment.<sup>30</sup> As we shall see in subsequent chapters, there is a clear anti-Establishment atmosphere pervading each of the British conspiracy thrillers, and each of the case studies alludes to the story of the Cambridge Five. The story casts a long shadow over le Carré’s work, particularly the figure of Kim Philby (‘a bogey in my life’ remarked the writer in 2014).<sup>31</sup> The story of ‘The Five’ has been told and re-told frequently on television and in film, with seven dramas about these figures between 1971 and 2003. However their influence stretches much further when we consider other screen texts that have made use of characters in the mould of the Cambridge spies. For example, there is the Philby-esque Maurice Castle in Grahame Greene’s *The Human Factor*. Philby also appears as a character in the novel and film versions of *The Fourth Protocol* in 1984 and 1987 respectively. In 1986, Leslie Phillips played a flamboyant defector in the vein of Guy Burgess in an episode of Anglia Television’s *Mr Palfrey of Westminster*, while Sir Adrian Chapple, the arch-villain in *The Whistle Blower*, is clearly an Anthony Blunt clone. However the most preposterous nod to the influence of the Cambridge Spies must surely be 1984’s *The Jigsaw Man* in which Michael Caine plays a double-agent called ‘Phil Kimberley’. Willmetts and Moran’s article on this subject is a revealing study of just how influential the story has been with television and film makers. Perhaps the reason for its

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<sup>28</sup> Denning, 1987

<sup>29</sup> Wark, 1991. 158.

<sup>30</sup> Snyder, J.R. ‘The Spy Story as Modern Tragedy’ *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol.5, No.3, Summer 1977: 216

<sup>31</sup> John le Carré in conversation with Phillippe Sands. Hay Festival 2013, Friday 31 May 2013.

continued interest is that, as they put it, ‘the story of the Cambridge five is idiosyncratically British’, dealing with the same themes of betrayal, patriotism, class and imperial decline that are to be found in le Carré’s work. The narratives of each of the British case studies also draw heavily on this story of betrayal in the heart of the Establishment.<sup>32</sup>

Former American intelligence officer Tod Hoffman claims that it was as a result of the Cambridge spies that ‘something changed in 1963: not the world, perhaps, but our perception of it’ and that the impact of Philby’s treachery on le Carré’s life and work should not be underestimated.<sup>33</sup> Le Carré has claimed that his was one of the names that Philby betrayed to the Soviets and that this effectively ended his diplomatic career in Germany (a claim that has never been substantiated). Le Carré wrote a damning evaluation of the man in the introduction to the book *Philby: The Spy Who Betrayed*, explaining that his betrayal ‘was a trauma; he was of our blood and hunted with our pack.’<sup>34</sup> Once again we return to the two most penetrating themes of le Carré’s work: loyalty and betrayal, with le Carré also emphasising here the way in which Philby’s treachery was particularly painful because it was inflicted against ‘his own’ kin from within the British Establishment. Literary critic Ron Rosenbaum is dramatic in his appraisal of the effects of Philby’s treachery: ‘The age of paranoia...the plague of suspicion, distrust that has emanated from intelligence agencies...is the true legacy of Kim Philby’.<sup>35</sup> Le Carré himself said of the period ‘it was witch-hunt time...riven with suspicion and rumour...I just smelt it like death before you find the corpse’.<sup>36</sup>

However, despite the clear mileage that has been gained from the case of the Cambridge spies in the number of novels, films and television productions that have used it as a source of inspiration, one former member of the security services is more measured than le Carré and Rosenbaum in his appraisal of the events. He believes that the greatest impact of the treachery of Philby and the Cambridge Spies was that it tainted the

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<sup>32</sup> Willmetts, S. & Moran, C. ‘Filming treachery: British cinema and television’s fascination with the Cambridge Five’ *Journal of British Cinema and Television* vol.10, No.1, 2013: 49-70.

<sup>33</sup> Hoffmann, T. *Le Carré’s Landscape* UK: Queen’s University Press, 2001. 111.

<sup>34</sup> Knightly, P., Leitch, D., & Page, B. *Philby: The Spy Who Betrayed* UK: André Deutsch Ltd, 1968. 9-24.

<sup>35</sup> Hoffman, 2001. 111.

<sup>36</sup> Sisman, 2015. 193.

reputation of the Service. In terms of permanent damage however he argues that the situation was in fact quickly contained.<sup>37</sup> As the view of one individual, this assessment should be taken with caution. Furthermore, this dismissal does not address how many spies were betrayed and died as a result of Philby's treachery between 1934 and 1955. It does, however, remind us of the frequent disparity between the public sense of conspiracy and the reality.

Film historian Gordon B. Arnold reminds us that what is important to the development of the conspiracy genre is the issue of perception rather than reality.<sup>38</sup> Whatever may be the reality within the secret state, the conspiracy thriller has consistently thrived because of how political traumas have been perceived by the general public and, crucially, presented in the media. By definition, the secret services remain intensely guarded about their work, both their successes and their failures. This secrecy fuels speculation that helps to sustain the public's interest in espionage and conspiracy, though it does little to help us understand the reality of the inner workings of the secret state. The rumour, hyperbole and sheer fiction reported about the Cambridge spies meant that whatever the reality, the British public believed that the Soviet bear had left a gaping wound at the heart of the Establishment.

Despite Philby's defection in January 1963, the story of the five re-gained momentum for later audiences as a result of the revelations about Anthony Blunt as the 'fourth man' in the Cambridge spy ring. That story broke one week before the BBC adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* aired in 1979, thus infusing the series with a topicality that television schedulers dream of (in an age of limited terrestrial channels the series also benefitted from an evening strike by ITV staff). It is worth noting that Blunt's treason had been known to the security services since the 1960s but he had secured a deal whereby he was immune from prosecution. Public knowledge of his immunity fuelled disquiet about how the Establishment was 'looking after its own' despite a heinous crime having been committed. This anti-Establishment sentiment so resonated with the public following Blunt's exposure that the feeling permeates many of the British

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<sup>37</sup> Senior SIS Officer (Retired). Interview with the author, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Arnold, G. *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television & Politics* USA: Praeger Publishers, 2008.1.

conspiracy thrillers of the 1980s. In contrast – and adding fuel to the fire of those who would claim that the Establishment was self-serving – traitor George Blake had been sentenced to 42 years in 1961, and as le Carré noted ‘hardly a tear was shed for (him)...half a foreigner and half a Jew...while Blunt was pardoned’.<sup>39</sup> For Le Carré the message was clear: the Establishment was closing ranks. Sisman points out that the author’s persistent depiction of such cynicism was a means of revenge through which le Carré could criticise ‘the old-school ties in British intelligence’.<sup>40</sup> Ben MacIntyre reminds us that Kim Philby’s recruitment epitomises the nepotism within the Establishment, explaining that deputy head of MI6 Valentine Vivian was asked about Philby’s suitability for the service and replied simply that he ‘knew his people’.<sup>41</sup> As later chapters demonstrate, the figure of Kim Philby, the story of the Cambridge Spies and an anti-Establishment sentiment, loom large over the British conspiracy thriller films.

If the themes of loyalty and betrayal recur throughout le Carré’s work, then so too does the style he adopts in order to explore these themes. It is important for this study to explore le Carré’s style because it has heavily influenced the way in which the same themes are expressed in the British conspiracy thrillers. Reviews of the author’s work frequently include the same adjectives: his settings are ‘seedy’ and ‘grubby’ and their inhabitants ‘realistic’ and ‘amoral’. Le Carré’s name has become synonymous with a depiction of the world that is ‘murky’, ‘downbeat’ or ‘drab’. This is never more evident than in le Carré’s metaphorical use of darkness and his depiction of setting. Philip Kemp speaks for many when he describes the le Carré vision as ‘shorn of glamour and high tech gadgets, steeped in murky moral complexity’.<sup>42</sup> Certainly this atmosphere is indicative of the Smiley trilogy that was published between 1974 and 1978, a period that reflected dark times for Britain both literally and metaphorically (one feature in the *New York Times* was entitled ‘The Battle of Britain, 1974: A gradual chilling, a fear of dreadful things’).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Aronoff, 1999. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Sisman, 2015. 255.

<sup>41</sup> MacIntyre, B. *Kim Philby: A Spy Among Friends* UK: Bloomsbury, 2014. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Kemp, P. ‘Beyond Bond’ *Sight & Sound*, Vol.19,10th Oct. 2009.8.

<sup>43</sup> When, 2010. 250.

In light of the social and political crises that Britain faced, it is not surprise that darkness acts as a recurring literal and metaphorical device in le Carré's novels and it is interesting to note that almost all his novels begin at night-time. The motif of darkness reflects the state of a nation plunged into moral darkness by betrayal, and which in turn betrays its own principals in order to win the Cold War. As le Carré himself said recently '(It's) the same old stuff that I've been writing for years...I had reached the conviction that...in the name of anti-communism we could do terrible things.'<sup>44</sup> The film critic J. Sutherland described the recent adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (Alfredson, 2011) as 'crepuscular', aptly identifying how the film captures the essence of Britain in its twilight, its international influence waning and therefore even more reliant on the potentially harmful relationship with America.<sup>45</sup> This reflects the perceptions about Britain's loss of autonomy, with self-interest subordinated to the demands of the United States. Similarly David Monaghan explores how le Carré's novels depicted Britain as 'a country with moribund tendencies which are powerfully expressed through images of darkness, decrepitude, emptiness and coldness.'<sup>46</sup> This metaphorical use of darkness recurs consistently across the range of conspiracy thrillers: the barren, endless dark horizon in the opening shot of *Defence of the Realm*, or the dimly lit assignations that take place in *All the President's Men* in which Alan Pakula attempted to evoke 'a child's fears of darkness..... there is something out there that you can't see that could destroy you'.<sup>47</sup>

Just as setting is used in the Hollywood conspiracy thrillers to convey the films' messages and themes, the same is true in le Carré's novels. Specifically, the author presents familiar surroundings in new and intentionally disconcerting ways so as to foster a sense of what Melley terms agency panic. This is achieved in the BBC version of *Smiley's People* through careful shot composition and cinematographer Kenneth Macmillan explained that 'in le Carré's novel...extreme danger may lurk behind the seemingly bland and innocent situation...we begin to look at things with particular and insecure intensity'.<sup>48</sup> The ways in which Macmillan and Simon Langton chose to film such aspects reflects the sense in le

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<sup>44</sup> John le Carré in conversation with Phillippe Sands. Hay Festival 2013, Friday 31 May 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Sutherland, J. 'To Catch a Spy' *Sight & Sound*, October 2011, Vol.21, No.10. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Bloom, H. *John le Carré: Modern Critical Views* UK: Chelsea House, 1987. 117.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, J. *Alan J. Pakula: His Films & His Life* USA: Back Stage Books, 2005. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Wiener, J.D. 'The Making of Smiley's People' *American Cinematographer*, Nov. 1983. 68-73.

Carré's work that nothing and no one can be trusted and that, as le Carré himself has indicated, we are as likely to be betrayed by a wife or lover as by our friend or our own country or its institutions, reminding us once more of Melley's notion that the feeling of loss of individual autonomy provides a suitable breeding ground for conspiracy.

Tomas Alfredson's adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* is one of the most recent screen versions of le Carré's work to convey these qualities through setting. The critic Jean Oppenheimer describes the film as 'drenched in nicotine and bureaucratic sweat', with the 'nicotine' suggesting a griminess that reflects the ways in which the lives of le Carré's characters are tainted by betrayal.<sup>49</sup> The stain of nicotine is also an apt metaphor for the depiction of Britain's secret state as being tarnished by 'the price (paid) in order to preserve a society', as le Carré opined. Hoyte van Hoytema's cinematography complements this message by creating what Oppenheimer describes as a 'somewhat colourless look' and a 'monochromatic palette' that contribute to the sense of decay and cynicism that pervades the film. What le Carré's novels and the British conspiracy thrillers also have in common is that Britain is, as David Monaghan states 'essentially urban ...filled with decaying, broken and disintegrating objects and buildings...and there is little colour.'<sup>50</sup> Since these narratives explore issues of state then it stands to reason that much of the action takes place in an urban environment, specifically London. Le Carré's novels are firmly set around real locations in the capital and the decay and disintegration which he describes are an apt metaphor for a world tainted by personal and professional betrayal and corruption.

Le Carré devotes much attention during his meticulous research to his settings. As working practice, he records detailed descriptions of real-life locations in notebooks, which he then works into the prose, revealing 'an impressive demonstration of why his books are set so firmly in their landscapes and carry such conviction'.<sup>51</sup> The author takes pictures of the locations he intends to use and then has them enlarged so that his descriptions of the urban environment benefit from the detail and attention to detail of

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<sup>49</sup> Oppenheimer, J. 'A Mole in the Ministry' *American Cinematographer*, Dec. 2011, Vol. 92 Issue 12. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Monaghan, D. *The Novels of John le Carré: The Art of Survival* UK: Blackwell, 1985. 46.

<sup>51</sup> Sisman, 2015. 366

photographic reality. The images are at his side as he writes, in order to draft vivid descriptions of his scenes. It is this careful preparation of setting which demonstrates le Carré's photographic eye for detail. One might think that this quality would make his work easily transferrable to screen, so it is ironic that his vivid and evocative prose has frequently failed to make the transition.

The criticisms that are levelled at the le Carré adaptations are also - as we shall see - frequently directed at the British conspiracy thrillers. One significant problem is that while the le Carré adaptations have captured the author's evocative use of setting, they have struggled to convey his dense plotting and idiosyncratic atmospheric touches. *Sight & Sound* noted that 'nebulosity works in le Carré's novels but it poses problems for film', and le Carré's atmosphere and characterisation retains an intangible quality that is notoriously film-proof.<sup>52</sup> For example, Hugh Greene dismissed the landmark BBC adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* as 'turgid, obscure and pretentious' (as the brother of espionage novelist Grahame Greene one might think that Greene would be more appreciative of the le Carré milieu).<sup>53</sup>

One of the reasons why critics and audiences have not always warmed to the screen adaptations of le Carré's work is because of the insufficient action and dynamism for the visual medium. In his books, there are often two characters talking at length in a room with the subtleties of non-verbal communication conveying much in his prose. While this can be communicated to the screen by a look or gesture, any film that sustains this as an approach to developing characterisation and narrative over two hours runs a dangerous risk of rendering a film obscure, leaden and too slow-paced for a mainstream tastes. Frequently, there is a subtext to the conversation and a menacing undertone that should not be brought too near to the surface by film-makers. To do so results in performances that are clichéd and becomes a pastiche, yet to remain too enigmatic is to render the work open to criticism of obscurity and turgidity. Perhaps the main problem for most audiences is that the limited screen time of mainstream feature films does not allow for obfuscation or for complexities to be resolved within a two-hour time frame. Hugh

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<sup>52</sup> Sutherland, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Davies, B. 'One Man's Television' *Broadcast*, No.5, November 1979. 17.

Greene's review also complained that 'at the heart of things there was somehow an immense void'.<sup>54</sup> It is ironic that Greene identified this as a weakness of the television production, because it is precisely the 'void' that le Carré is surely intending. Le Carré presents Britain in decline: the Cold War malaise and the state's moral bankruptcy have created a void where once-sacred and revered institutions are exposed as archaic and corrupt. Though this sense of a void is deliberate and indicative of the British spy novel at this time, it is not a sentiment that has always been successfully transferred to the screen.

Le Carré's friend Karel Reisz believed that many adaptations of his books productions are blighted by the fact that the complexity of the plots means that 'adapting them always involves one in very painful and unsatisfactory reducing, which I don't think ever quite works'.<sup>55</sup> The inevitable reduction that comes with transferring several hundred pages of prose into a couple of hours screen time has frequently resulted in critically and commercially unsatisfactory results including *The Looking Glass War* (Pierson, 1969), *Little Drummer Girl* (Hill, 1984), *The Tailor of Panama* (Boorman, 2001). The most successful adaptations remain those on the small screen which have allowed the characters, their relationships and complex plot lines to be developed over six hours of screen time. Cinematographer Kenneth Macmillan explained about his work on the BBC version of *Smiley's People*, 'when you deal with a complex script, it would be extremely foolish to move the camera around too much... This was a script where the language was of primary importance'.<sup>56</sup> However this reliance on dialogue also renders television productions susceptible to the criticism of verbosity. As the antithesis of the pacy, crowd-pleasing Bondian spy genre, in le Carré's work action is subordinated to plot and character.

While le Carré's mastery of subtlety and understatement is one of his greatest achievements in print, it is one of the most difficult qualities to capture on film. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why the British conspiracy thrillers are less well-known

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Sisman, 2015. 394

<sup>56</sup> Wiener, J.D. 'The Making of Smiley's People' *American Cinematographer*, Nov. 1983. 68-73.

than their American and European forebears. While the British conspiracy film-makers found le Carré a source of inspiration, the attempt to replicate his written style on film meant that audiences found the results at times as source of alienation. Pakula's *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men* are films of subtlety with moments of detailed plot exposition and scenes of lengthy dialogue to rival anything in le Carré. However in the hands of Alan J. Pakula such moments are off-set by effective visual composition that sustains the viewer's interest. We forgive the verbosity because it is counterbalanced by rich cinematography that compliments the action, creates tension and presents a visual metaphor for the films' themes. Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* has more pace than Pakula's films and his protagonist is rarely in one location for too long; the ever present threat that assassins are hunting him provides each scene with pace and tension. It is perhaps ironic that the style of le Carré, which is so celebrated and indicative of the British espionage genre as a whole, is one aspect that film-makers sought to emulate in other productions but which also limited their effectiveness and commercial success. As the following chapters will show, film critics were quick to note the debt that the British case studies owed to the style of le Carré. However, the critics also expressed the ways in which the films were, to varying degrees, blighted by the same problem of how to convey slow-burning tension, subtle characterisation and meaningful political comment to an audience within the conventions of mainstream cinema.

## Chapter Four

### The Political Context to the British Conspiracy Thrillers

Just as the Hollywood and European conspiracy cycles reacted to perceived government indignities, the British conspiracy cycle emerged as a response to similar tumultuous events in Britain during the 1980s. What were the factors that proved so influential in determining the messages and themes found in the British conspiracy thrillers? The three case study films in this thesis were influenced by the methods adopted by the British government in order to fight the Cold War during a period of deteriorating relations between East and West. The film-makers deemed the methods of the government and its security services to be excessive, draconian and counter-productive, and their response was to employ the conspiracy form as a means of expressing their misgivings through mainstream cinema. This chapter examines the most important issues of national defence and security that shaped the British conspiracy genre.

A glance through the headlines of the period reveals a nation gripped by scandals in the intelligence community. A security service report dubbed 1982 ‘the year of the security scandal’,<sup>1</sup> but since the 1970s there had been a mounting fear in Establishment circles that the British political landscape was shifting towards the left as it had done in other parts of Europe, with coups and uprisings in countries like Portugal, Spain, and Greece.<sup>2</sup> In 1976, professor of Government and Labour party candidate Stephen Haseler, an advocate of radical political reform, joined in the chorus of paranoia warning that ‘only a supreme act of political will’ could prevent a takeover by an anti-authoritarian Marxist regime that would ‘isolate Britain from the rest of the world’.<sup>3</sup> Robin Ramsay reminds us that during this period ‘many of the ruling class in this country believed they were on the edge of a left wing revolution’.<sup>4</sup> Care has been taken to only include in this chapter those events which influenced the three films central to the thesis. My intention is not to

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<sup>1</sup> Sked, A. & Cook, C. *Post-War Britain: 1945-1992*. UK: Penguin, 1993. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Aldrich, R & Cormac, J. *The Black Door* UK: William Collins, 2016. 356.

<sup>3</sup> Haseler, S. *The Death of British Democracy* UK: Elek Books Ltd, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Ramsay, R. *Politics and Paranoia* UK: Picnic Publishing, 1990. 146.

confirm the validity of the conspiracy theories which dogged the Establishment and security services in the 1980s. Instead, what was important in the development of the conspiracy genre was the public perception fostered in the media that the government and intelligence community were behaving conspiratorially. The first part of this chapter will establish that in the absence of sober academic analysis of intelligence matters, the British press and fiction-makers provided the only source of information about the security services. This meant that the public's appetite for conspiracy was largely fed by a diet of sensationalist and hyperbolic half-truths and rumours, with such sources filling the vacuum in the absence of academic research. It is unsurprising that, as historian Simon Willmetts argues, the academic study of intelligence emerged in the first place as a 'response to fiction' and as a means of 'dispelling myths' about the security services.<sup>5</sup>

May 1979 marked the beginning of Margaret Thatcher's eleven year leadership as Conservative Prime Minister. At the time, many of the government's foreign and domestic policies were referred to collectively as Thatcherism, and this fact reminds us that there was a perception that those policies were the prime minister's own personal conviction and vision for the nation. This is important because the press frequently presented policies of national security as reflecting the personal crusade of Thatcher herself. At times this resulted in a negative perception of the prime minister, as opinion polls from the time reveal. For instance, over half of those polled in May 1983 (54%) believed that Thatcher 'tends to talk down to people' and 49% considered her to be 'out of touch with ordinary people'. The figures for those statements remain consistent in March 1984 and February 1985, and peak in June 1987, with 61% and 53% respectively.<sup>6</sup> On average during Mrs Thatcher's premiership, 40% of the public were satisfied with the way she was doing her job while 54% were dissatisfied. Average satisfaction with the way her government was running the country was 32%, compared to an average 59% who were dissatisfied.<sup>7</sup> No such polls exist regarding matters of security because it is

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<sup>5</sup> Moran, Christopher J. *Intelligence studies in Britain and the US: historiography since 1945* Edinburgh University Press, 2013: 46

<sup>6</sup> 'Conservative Leader Image – Margaret Thatcher.' *Ipsos MORI*. Fieldwork: Sept. 1978 – Sept. 1990, Published: 25<sup>th</sup> September 2016 .  
<<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/58/Conservative-Leader-Image.aspx?view=wide>>

<sup>7</sup> 'Margaret Thatcher – Public opinion trends.' *Ipsos MORI* , Fieldwork: May 1979 – November 1990. Published: 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2013.

important to remember that, though knowledge of the security services was an open secret, MI5 and MI6 were not formally acknowledged in 1989 and 1986, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of the 1980s saw a significant decline in relations between the Soviet Union and the West that resulted in the period being referred to as the Second Cold War. Beginning with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Second Cold War was marked by the abandonment of détente in favour of a more antagonistic foreign policy being adopted by Britain in reaction to Soviet aggression.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 took the Western powers by surprise, and its intensity and ferocity hampered the process of détente.<sup>10</sup> This in turn resulted in the American and British governments redoubling their efforts to gain military superiority over the Russians as a means of forming a strong and united front against any aggression. Another important event which exacerbated international relations was Russia's hard-line response to the Polish dissent which began in 1980 and was championed by the Solidarity movement under the leadership of Lech Walesa. Relations between 10 Downing Street and the Kremlin were described by Britain's Ambassador in Moscow as 'thin in substance and sour in flavour'.<sup>11</sup> In October 1979, five months after becoming Prime Minister, Thatcher told an audience in Luxembourg that 'the Soviet armies in Europe are organised and trained for attack. Their military strength is growing. The Russians do not publish their intentions. So we must judge them by their military capabilities.'<sup>12</sup> The fight against Soviet imperialism was one that preoccupied many on the right, and Aldrich and Cormac remind us that even before her election victory in 1979, Thatcher and her advisors had planned a detailed programme to combat Soviet subversion. They were keen to 'unleash' the security services and 'assume the offensive' against what she called 'the enemy within'.<sup>13</sup> Thatcher's vision was influenced by the right-wing political think tank known as *Le Cercle* (The Circle), established in response to the political chaos in Europe during the

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<<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3158/Margaret-Thatcher-19252013.aspx>>

<sup>8</sup> Jones, L. 'The time when spy agencies didn't officially exist.' *BBC News* 8<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2014.

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29938135>>

<sup>9</sup> Halliday, F. *The Making of the Second Cold War* UK: Verso, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Cox, M. *Beyond the Cold War: Superpowers at the crossroads* Vol. 14, University Press of America, 1990.18.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, R. Salmon, P. & Twigg S.R. (Eds) *Foreign & Commonwealth Office: Documents on British Policy Overseas* UK: Routledge, 2013. 328.

<sup>12</sup> Thatcher, M 'Europe: the obligations of liberty.' Winston Churchill Memorial Lecture, Luxembourg, 18<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1979. <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104149>>

<sup>13</sup> Aldrich & Cormac, 2016. 353.

1970s. *Le Cercle* was partially funded by the CIA and established a network of action groups whose objective was to combat left-wing entryism. The British wing of *Le Cercle* was known as ‘the ‘61’ and was, according to Aldrich and Cormac’s 2016 assessment, ‘instrumental in developing many of Thatcher’s ideas while she was leader of the opposition’.<sup>14</sup>

A familiarity was quickly established between the government and the intelligence community that was noted in the media and by film-makers who found fertile ground in the ‘cosy relationship’ that was fostered between the two.<sup>15</sup> Historians have noted Thatcher’s voracious appetite for intelligence and her interest in security matters: apparently she simply ‘adored’ it.<sup>16</sup> Christopher Andrew explains how the prime minister’s desire for intelligence increased over the course of her tenure and, unlike any of her predecessors, she formalised regular meetings with MI5’s Director General.<sup>17</sup> Thatcher was also the only prime minister to regularly attend the meeting of the Joint Intelligence Committee.<sup>18</sup> Her Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, observed that ‘most prime ministers have a soft spot for the security services...but Margaret, an avid reader of the works of Frederick Forsyth, was positively besotted by them’.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note the sense of synergy here between fact and fiction: the prime minister devouring the works of the novelist who, in 1984’s *The Fourth Protocol*, theorized about the catastrophic consequences of Soviet subversion in Britain.

In particular, Thatcher was quick to deploy MI5 to combat entryism: the strategy by which left-leaning groups could be infiltrated by communist radicals to result in a shift towards a more extreme political stance. However, the government’s attempts to prevent this occurring were perceived by her opponents as something akin to a witch-hunt of the left. The investigative journalist Paul Foot believes that Thatcherism ‘was the culmination

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 356.

See also: Blackhurst, C. ‘Aitken Dropped by the Right’s Secret Club’ *The Independent*, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1997. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/aitken-dropped-by-the-rights-secret-dub-1258522.html>>

<sup>15</sup> Milne, S. *The Enemy Within* UK, 2004. 303.

<sup>16</sup> Aldrich & Cormac, 352

<sup>17</sup> Andrew, C. *Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* UK: Penguin, 2010. 682.

<sup>18</sup> Aldrich & Cormac, 352.

<sup>19</sup> Milne, 2004. 303.

of a sustained campaign designed to weaken both Labour and the Liberal Parties'.<sup>20</sup> This is a view echoed by other writers including Barrie Penrose and Roger Courtoir whose *The Pencourt File* gave details of Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson's paranoia about conspiracies in the intelligence community to undermine his leadership.<sup>21</sup> Wilson's conclusions were not altogether unfounded because one MI5 dossier found that 'there is little doubt that the Labour Party is very vulnerable to the allegation of communist or left-wing infiltration. It is estimated that between twenty and thirty Labour MPs are members of the Communist Party'.<sup>22</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was deemed the most subversive organisation, and with a membership approaching 30,000 it was closely monitored by the intelligence services.<sup>23</sup> What these examples show is that there was a perception of conspiracy on both sides: the right represented by the government and security forces perceived that the left was susceptible to Soviet infiltration, while left-wing groups believed that the security services were adopting excessive measures of control and surveillance to disrupt them. Whatever the reality, the heightened sense of paranoia found its way into the British conspiracy cycle, with politically motivated film-makers sensitive to the zeitgeist, seizing on the prevailing mood for inspiration.

The work of intelligence historians has been useful in establishing the extent to which fears of Soviet subversion were justified, and the so-called 'thirty year rule' means that once-classified material is now emerging that can help us to gauge the extent to which the measures adopted to combat subversion were justified. Anthony Glees' research in the Stasi archives from the former East Germany reveal that NATO's rearmament after 1979 resulted in a 'huge extension' of Soviet interest in Britain.<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, a KGB report from February 1984 entitled 'Chief Conclusions and views adopted at the meeting of heads of service' concludes that the 'primary task' is to devote attention to 'active measures'. More explicitly, it states that 'the recruitment of valuable agents from among foreign nationals...is the keystone of all operational measures'.<sup>25</sup> Glees draws attention to

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<sup>20</sup> Foot, P. *Who Framed Colin Wallace?* UK: Macmillan, 1989. 73-77.

<sup>21</sup> Courtoir, R. & Penrose, B. *The Pencourt File* UK: Sedker & Warburg, 1978.

<sup>22</sup> Foot, P. *Who Framed Colin Wallace?* UK: Macmillan, 1989. 47

<sup>23</sup> Andrew, 2010. 594.

<sup>24</sup> Glees, A. *The Stasi Files*.UK: Free Press, 1993. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew, C. & Gordievsky, O. *Instruction from the Centre* UK: Sceptre, 1991. 39-40.

one Stasi report from October 1988 which applauds the ‘...continuous flow of successfully executed tasks. Excellent work is being done’.<sup>26</sup> Glees also concludes that espionage activities conducted by the Stasi generated 8000 pieces of intelligence about British politics.<sup>27</sup> Christopher Andrew’s access to MI5’s files from this period show that the British government was provided with information which suggested that Soviet subversion was a genuine threat. Andrew quotes statistics from a report entitled ‘Identified Hostile Intelligence Personnel in London 1967-1988’ which concludes that the numbers of agents in Britain reached its peak in early 1977, with between 50-100 Soviet personnel and over 200 ‘hostiles’ from other nations. Between 1980 and 1988 figures fluctuate but remain between around 140 – 200 of other nations and 50 from Russia.<sup>28</sup> These recently released details are sobering reminders that, amid the hyperbole in the media and claims of conspiracy in fiction, Soviet subversion was taking place during the 1980s.

The climate of conspiracy was exacerbated by an unusually high number of security service scandals during the first five years of Margaret Thatcher becoming prime minister. The government’s stringent measures to tackle subversion would drive disenchanted civil servants to ‘blow the whistle’ publicly, which then paradoxically resulted in the government adopting even more severe measures to prevent further secrets being exposed. A significant part of the problem lay with the Conservative approach to security which was, according to Moran, deemed ‘too rigid’ in the face of calls for openness and transparency.<sup>29</sup> The approach of the government when dealing with security scandals was to invoke what writer Tim Slessor calls ‘the Whitehall Loop’:

‘the closed circuit procedure where in reply to questions asked of government, the replies are put together by the very people in government who are being investigated... It allows all involved to claim there was no overt (or covert) co-ordination. So there was no conspiracy, and if there was no conspiracy there was

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<sup>26</sup> Glees, 1993. 155.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 249.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew, 2010. 573.

<sup>29</sup> Moran, 2011.

therefore no cover up....The Whitehall Loop gives good protection from outside scrutiny'.<sup>30</sup>

Slessor's definition of this process is helpful because the Whitehall Loop is a recurring narrative device in the conspiracy thrillers.

The trial of Ministry of Defence whistle-blower Clive Ponting is indicative of the government's application of this procedure and his case is also typical of other whistle-blowers from the time. In 1984, Ponting sent two documents to Labour MP Tam Dalyell that brought into question the validity of the decision for the British submarine HMS Conqueror to torpedo the Argentinian vessel General Belgrano during the Falklands War in 1982. Ponting told Channel 4's *After Dark*, 'Nobody who is in favour of greater openness is seriously suggesting that we ought to be able to go in the next day and read the cabinet minutes...but that's not to say that there isn't a massive over obsession with secrecy in Britain'.<sup>31</sup> Like Ponting, many of the other whistle-blowers believed that while aspects of the work of the intelligence services must remain secret, their methods had become excessive. Ponting's ten day trial resulted in a unanimous verdict of not-guilty, a humiliation for the government; the media depicted him as a modern day David battling against the state Goliath.

The Ponting affair was one of an unprecedented ten leak enquiries which Margaret Thatcher ordered within the first five years of her taking office.<sup>32</sup> In addition, she frequently 'wielded the 1911 Official Secrets Act to bludgeon those who leaked', with Aldrich and Cormac claiming that throughout its existence, the Act had only been used on average once every two years. In contrast, eleven civil servants were prosecuted during Margaret Thatcher's tenure.<sup>33</sup> The government's reaction to whistle-blowers was severe, yet their response only exacerbated the public perception that the Establishment's fervour in stifling criticism was indicative of a conspiratorial and nefarious state that had

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<sup>30</sup> Slessor, T. *Lying in State* UK: Aurum Press Ltd, 2008. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Clive Ponting speaking on *After Dark*. Channel 4, Aired: May 2nd 1987.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-KkeedPV24>>

<sup>32</sup> Dorrell, S. *The Silent Conspiracy* UK: Heinemann, 1994. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Aldrich & Cormac, 2015. 366

something to hide. This was the perception that was shaped by the media, though Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric on such matters did little to challenge the popular mood for conspiracy.

As well as whistle-blowers, the period was also marked by a 'mole-mania' which served to convince many in the government that Soviet infiltration was a greater threat than ever.<sup>34</sup> Hugh Hambleton, Geoffrey Prime and Michael Bettany were all arrested for espionage between 1982 and 1984. These cases would provide inspiration for the conspiracy film-makers, but none more so than the legacy of the Cambridge Spies which had sensationally re-emerged in 1979 with the exposure of Anthony Blunt as the so-called 'fourth man' in the infamous spy ring. The revelations that Blunt, Establishment grandee and Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, was a spy were revealed by investigative journalist Andrew Boyle in *Climate of Treason* (reinforcing the perception that journalists rather than the authorities were the more adept at investigating crime). Blunt had been arrested by the intelligence services in 1964 but given immunity from prosecution in return for providing information. News of his immunity deal played into the hands of those quick to see something rotten at the heart of an Establishment that was looking after its own, and suggestions of cronyism soon found their way into the headlines. MP for Sheffield Patrick Duffy seized on the anti-Establishment feeling by asking the prime minister in the House of Commons if she would 'impress upon the Security Commission the importance, in future and recent recruitment, of selecting a different type of officer, from a different social background—someone who is well aware of the social conditions of the entire country and not one part of it? She may stumble...on a more patriotic, dependable and reliable officer'.<sup>35</sup> Duffy's comments remind us of the anti-Establishment theme that permeates much of the conspiracy genre, and there is no doubt that this can partially be attributed to the interest generated by the Blunt case and the way in which it reinvigorated interest in the Cambridge Five and fostered long-simmering resentment about a conspiratorial and elitist ruling class.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 360.

<sup>35</sup> Thatcher, M. Statement to the House of Commons on Security *Hansard*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1981. *HC Deb 26 March 1981 vol 1 cc1079-85*  
<[http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1981/mar/26/security#S6CV0001P0\\_19810326\\_HOC\\_183](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1981/mar/26/security#S6CV0001P0_19810326_HOC_183)>

Fears of Soviet moles in Whitehall would also underpin the case of former MI5 officer Peter Wright and the publication of his memoir, *Spycatcher*, in 1987. Wright had become convinced that the Soviets had infiltrated the security services since the days of the Cambridge Spies, and his book was an attempt to expose this as well as other details that had hitherto gone unreported.<sup>36</sup> What intensified the attention paid to Wright's memoir was the protracted legal wrangling around it as the government tried in vain to secure an injunction against the former spy's revelations. Like the Ponting case, the book's release was another security humiliation for the government. *Spycatcher* sold over two million copies, indicating the extent to which spy fever gripped the nation and how counter-productive the government's attempts to silence Wright had been. The film versions of *The Fourth Protocol* and *The Whistle Blower* were released in the same year as the book and their prescience in addressing some of the issues raised by Wright was not lost on critics.

The Conservative government also saw red - literally and metaphorically - when confronting the unions and peace groups, which were considered hotbeds of political dissent and therefore susceptible to communist subversion. The antagonism between the government and these groups reached its zenith during the early part of the 1980s, and became another factor that infused the British conspiracy cycle. There had been numerous clashes between the British government and unions throughout the 1970s (during Edward Heath's 'Who Rules the Country?' election in 1974 and the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978), and how to deal with the unions had become what journalist Seumas Milne describes an obsession.<sup>37</sup> We can see this in Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric during the miner's strike in 1984, when she drew parallels with the Falklands War: 'We had to fight an enemy without in the Falklands', now the war must be fought with the enemy within.<sup>38</sup> Once again the security services were deployed and the former head of MI5 Stella Rimington later revealed their role in targeting the president of the National Union of Miners, Arthur Scargill, and other NUM leaders during the strike.<sup>39</sup> For the public, scenes of angry demonstrations and violence epitomised the feeling of a nation in

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<sup>36</sup> Gill, P. *Policing Politics: security intelligence and the liberal democratic state* UK: Routledge, 2012. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Milne, 2004. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 23.

<sup>39</sup> Bloom, C. *Thatcher's Secret War: Subversion, Coercion, Secrecy and Government, 1974-90* UK: The History Press, 2015.126.

crisis, and for some, watching mounted police trying to quell the unrest with force at the Battle of Orgreave in June 1984 was more evidence of the excessive measures being adopted by the state. Documentary maker David Drury and writer Martin Stellan had concerns of their own: for Drury the scenes of brutality during the miner's strike left an indelible impression, while Stellan was incensed by what he describes as Margaret Thatcher's 'hectoring tone' about left-wing subversion.<sup>40</sup> These feelings galvanised a response from both men which would influence their work together on *Defence of the Realm* a year later.

Operationally, it was MI5's F-Branch that was tasked with combatting counter subversion and, in a clear example of faction, this is the department for which the character John Preston works in Frederick Forsyth's *The Fourth Protocol*. Once again, the ability to access formerly classified documents allows us to gain a keener sense of the extent to which fears about 'the enemy within' were justified. In April 1976 (pre-dating Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election victory), MI5 identified the Communist Party of Great Britain as a 'major subversive threat within the trade union movement'.<sup>41</sup> In December 1977, information received from a Czech defector implicated senior trade unionists Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon as Soviet interests.<sup>42</sup> F-Branch officers also determined that approximately one-fifth of the leading full time officials in thirty four of the major unions were communists or communist sympathizers and therefore it intensified the surveillance of key figures within these groups.<sup>43</sup> MI5 department F2 'argued that this figure underestimated the extent of Communist influence...Communist penetration of the party had also increased the political influence on the left of the labour party.'<sup>44</sup>

According to the whistle blower and former MI5 officer Peter Wright, F-Branch also 'heavily infiltrated' the Worker's Revolution Party and the Socialist Workers Party.<sup>45</sup> Also targeted were prominent members of CND, and the surveillance of its leader Joan Lubbock finally prompted F-Branch employee Cathy Massiter to blow the whistle on the

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<sup>40</sup> Stellan, M. E-mail to the author, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew, 2010. 656.

<sup>42</sup> Pinder, C. *Dirty Tricks*. UK: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1991. 154.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew, 2010. 657.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Dorrill, 1993. 9.

department, deeming that the level of surveillance adopted was disproportionate.<sup>46</sup> In March 1983 Massiter gave a candid interview to Channel 4's *20/20 Vision* and in comments similar to those of Clive Ponting explained that 'We were violating our own rules. It seemed to be getting out of control.'<sup>47</sup> These revelations caused a further public relations disaster for the government and intelligence community. Peter Wright captured the common mood about the security services when he explained that 'it was easy to believe that we had the public's consent when we broke into a Soviet diplomat's house...the wholesale surveillance of a large proportion of the population raised more than a question mark...Big Brother loomed'.<sup>48</sup> Links to Orwell's dystopian vision of Britain would also be invoked by writer John Hale, whose book *The Whistle Blower* was heavily influenced by *1984*, a novel synonymous with extreme methods of state control and the abuse of civil liberties.

A further major influence on the British conspiracy cycle was the so-called special relationship between Britain and the United States. Like Margaret Thatcher, the American president, Ronald Reagan, was determined to adopt a more antagonistic stance towards Russia. As a result, Thatcher earned the title 'the Iron Lady' from the Soviet newspaper *Red Star*, while Reagan labelled Russia the 'Evil Empire'.<sup>49</sup> The post-war UK/USA treaty on the sharing of signals intelligence was considered 'nothing less than the lynchpin of the West's post-war intelligence system'.<sup>50</sup> In 1982 British defence expenditure was 16.7% higher than it had been just four years earlier and was higher than most other European nations.<sup>51</sup> The attention paid to defence bore out a conviction that Margaret Thatcher explained in a letter to Reagan that the Soviet Union 'had pursued a policy of expansion and subversion wherever they thought they could get away with it. They may well have thought that they could nibble away at our interests indefinitely. They need to be reminded in clear terms that this is not so'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew, 2010. 657

<sup>47</sup> Massiter, C. *20/20 Vision: MI5 Official Secrets* Channel 4, March 1985.  
< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuAzSDhZXk> >

<sup>48</sup> Wright, P. *Spycatcher*. UK: Viking, 1987. 360-361.

<sup>49</sup> Rusbridger, J. *The Intelligence Game: Illusions & Delusions of International Espionage* UK: I.B.Taurus & Co Ltd, 1991. 63.

<sup>50</sup> Aldrich, R., *GCHQ*. UK: HarperPress, 2011. 89.

<sup>51</sup> Dorrill, 1993. 420.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Mrs Thatcher to President Carter 26<sup>th</sup> January 1980 in Smith, R. Salmon, P. & Twigge S.R. (Eds) *Foreign & Commonwealth Office: Documents on British Policy Overseas* UK: Routledge, 2013. 98.

However, for some the special relationship favoured American interests disproportionately, with Britain rendered little more than its supine lap-dog. Stephen Dorrill concludes damningly that the relationship was not only completely unbalanced but was ‘used as a means of maintaining posture and shoring up Britain’s waning power’.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in October 1983 Foreign and Commonwealth Office employee Sarah Tisdall was sufficiently concerned about the effects of the special relationship to leak two government papers to *The Guardian* which set out plans for the arrival of US Cruise missiles in Britain.<sup>54</sup> Less than a year later MI5 officer Michael Bettany was convicted of passing documents to the KGB, claiming to be disenchanted by the ‘slavish adherence to the aggressive and maverick policy of the Reagan administration (that) contributed to an alarming heightening in tension’.<sup>55</sup> The importance of the UK/USA relationship and its impact on the British conspiracy thrillers cannot be underestimated: *Defence of the Realm* and *The Fourth Protocol* deal with nuclear accidents on USAF bases in East Anglia, while *The Whistle Blower* focuses on the effects of Soviet infiltration at GCHQ and the attempts to conceal the truth in order to retain American support.

The conspiracy films coalesce on one particular aspect of the special relationship: the nuclear deterrent. The debate surrounding nuclear armaments and the stationing of medium range Pershing and Cruise missiles on British soil was considered by some to be ‘the main concern’ of this period, and the support that CND and similar organisations garnered at the time would appear to bear out this notion.<sup>56</sup> The growth of CND support was noteworthy: while membership in 1979 amounted to less than 3000, by 1984 this figure had reached approximately 110,000, reflecting a period of intense military expansion involving Britain and America. Though the figure is small in terms of a percentage of the population, the sharp rise in membership indicates an increased awareness and interest in the nuclear debate. Furthermore, 250,000 people joined the march on the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston in March 1981, while in December 1982 35,000 people linked hands around the nine kilometre fence surrounding

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<sup>53</sup> Dorrill, 1993. 472.

<sup>54</sup> Milne, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>56</sup> Sked & Cook, 1993. 418.

the RAF base at Greenham Common.<sup>57</sup> In addition, large scale anti-nuclear public rallies occurred at least annually in London between 1980 and 1983.<sup>58</sup> One of the most effective and enduring strategies of CND was the publication of a pamphlet entitled *Protest and Survive* (a pun on *Protect and Survive*, a government publication issued to households on what to do in a nuclear attack). *Protest and Survive* presented the argument for a nuclear-free Europe by anti-nuclear luminaries including Bertrand Russell and E.P. Thompson. As with the unions and left wing political parties, the work and burgeoning support of the peace groups was sufficiently concerning to the government and intelligence services that measures were taken to try to stem any potential Soviet infiltration. A *Washington Post* article from May 1982 revealed the extent of American concern about the potential CND had to derail plans for the nuclear deterrent. The newspaper published a leaked memorandum from Eugene Rostow in which the American Director of Arms Control and Disarmament Policy explained plans to conduct a propaganda war that was to include a dirty tricks operation against the peace groups in Britain.<sup>59</sup> MI5's F-Branch focussed on CND and whistle-blower Cathy Massiter later revealed that her department had placed a spy within the organisation who concluded to his superiors that the movement was a 'communist inspired front'.<sup>60</sup>

MORI polls from this period can be used to gauge wider public opinion about the special relationship. Of those polled in October 1981, for instance, 59% did not believe that Cruise missiles should be stationed in Britain.<sup>61</sup> In a similar vein, a *Sunday Times* poll conducted in October 1983 reveals that 73% of those asked said that they believed the American government would ignore objections from the British government about using Cruise missiles, and deploy them anyway. Though this poll does not explicitly reveal the public's perception of the special relationship, it suggests a level of public scepticism

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<sup>57</sup> Caughie, J. *Edge of Darkness* UK: BFI Publishing, 2007. 36.

<sup>58</sup> Bloom, 2015. 153.

<sup>59</sup> Dorrill, S. 'The Puzzle Palace: America's National Security Agency and Its Relationship with Britain's GCHQ' *The Lobster*, No.3, 1984.

< <http://www.thedossier.info/lobster-magazine.htm> >

<sup>60</sup> Bloom, 2015. 97.

<sup>61</sup> 'Cruise Missiles – Trend. British opinion in the 1980s.' *Ipsos MORI*, Fieldwork: 1981-1983, Published: November 1983.

< <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3243/Cruise-missiles-trend.aspx?view=wide> >

about it. This is certainly the impression fostered in the films *Defence of the Realm* and *The Whistle Blower*.

The special relationship was not confined to issues around nuclear arms and, as *The Whistle Blower* attempts to portray, American involvement in Britain was also evident at GCHQ, which was the recipient of the majority of the intelligence budget.<sup>62</sup> The work at GCHQ was originally revealed by another investigative reporter, Duncan Campbell. His article from May 1976 entitled *The Eavesdroppers* broke official secrecy laws by giving details of not only the work at GCHQ but its close collaboration with the US National Security Agency. Sources within GCHQ itself confirmed the disproportionate nature of the work being undertaken in order to accommodate the requests of the NSA, to the extent that resources were at times diverted from low-priority domestic operations to urgent American targets because ‘the special relationship was regarded with the highest possible esteem’.<sup>63</sup> The most controversial event at GCHQ in the early 1980s was the trade union ban that was enforced at the site. Partially attributed to further fears of Soviet infiltration (a Russian mole inside a union at the nerve centre of British SIGINT operations would have been catastrophic for national security), a number of historians have linked the ban to pressure from the United States. Stephen Dorrill argues that the ban was indicative of a fear ‘that the NSA would take its ball away and stop GCHQ playing a major part in international intelligence’.<sup>64</sup> Others believe the ban was part of a wider American initiative to bring in the use of the controversial polygraph – the lie detector – in Britain, a scheme that was being championed by the NSA.<sup>65</sup> In 1984, *The Guardian* reported that ‘the Cabinet Secretary, Robert Armstrong, made it clear that senior Whitehall officials were reluctant to introduce lie detectors but had little choice because of pressure from Washington’.<sup>66</sup>

Like other government departments, GCHQ was at the centre of a number of scandals which helped to deepen a public perception of nefarious activities within the secret state.

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<sup>62</sup> Twigge, S., Hampshire, E. and Macklin, G. *British Intelligence: Secrets, spies and sources*. The National Archives, 2009. 259.

<sup>63</sup> Urban, M. *UK Eyes Alpha* UK: Faber & Faber, 1997. 59.

<sup>64</sup> Dorrill, 1993. 466.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 433.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 466.

The public controversies that blighted its work fostered the impression that it was, as the *New Statesman* described, ‘potentially far more sinister...and the implications of its work ultimately more threatening to civil liberty and world peace than all the other agencies put together’.<sup>67</sup> This was a sentiment echoed by Dennis Mitchell, a former long term employee who said that some of the work undertaken at GCHQ ‘would be considered unacceptable by the general public were it aware of them’.<sup>68</sup> One particular aspect of GCHQ’s work that caused public concern was telephone surveillance which was organised by a unit called the Tinkerbell Squad. In an example of the apparent excessive use of its power, *The Observer* revealed how the team from GCHQ had spied on three prominent Labour Party MPs.<sup>69</sup> Telephone surveillance was undertaken in collaboration with the General Post Office (who ran the national telephone system at that time) and the practice had become so commonplace that the Post Office Engineering Union (POEU) published a public report entitled *Tapping the Telephone* which outlined their concerns about the scale of surveillance that was in operation. (A copy of *Tapping the Telephone* can be clearly seen amongst the possessions of a GCHQ employee in *The Whistle Blower*.) The union’s report found that ‘public repugnance to the interception of communications...has increased’, reminding us of how the public mood surrounding security issues had become more cynical in this period of heightened surveillance and espionage activity.<sup>70</sup> The issue of excessive surveillance re-emerged once again when Duncan Campbell made a television documentary in 1985 as part of the BBC’s six part *Secret Society* series for the BBC about Zircon, a secret spy satellite system. His work was seized by Special Branch, never to be aired in its original format. These surveillance scandals are reminiscent of the controversial surveillance activities exposed in the American press in the 1970s about the CIA and FBI. Just as those revelations impacted on the American conspiracy cycle, the British scandals had precisely the same effect on film-makers a decade later.

One of the most important events at GCHQ during the 1980s was the arrest of Geoffrey Prime in summer 1982. The case had the hallmarks of a classic conspiracy and gripped

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<sup>67</sup> Campbell, D. ‘Threat of the Electronic Spies’ *New Statesman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1979.

<sup>68</sup> Dorrill, 1993. 466.

<sup>69</sup> Bloom, 2015. 22.

<sup>70</sup> *Tapping the Telephone* UK: Post Office Engineering Union, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1980. 27.

the public: a Soviet spy at the heart of British intelligence. Originally arrested for sexually abusing under-age girls, Prime surprised the police by confessing that he had been involved in espionage over a number of years during his work as a radio operator at GCHQ.<sup>71</sup> Prime was sentenced to thirty-eight years in prison but soon after his conviction the site came under scrutiny once again following a number of suicides of GCHQ personnel. There were twenty-five deaths in total over a short period of time, many of which were in suspicious circumstances, and the secrecy surrounding them was grist to the mill of conspiracy theorists.<sup>72</sup> There is debate amongst historians about these deaths, with Richard Aldrich speculating about links to KGB recruitment, while Clive Bloom ventures possible connections to so-called psychological operations or 'psyops'.<sup>73</sup> Whatever the truth, the Prime scandal and the suicides at GCHQ heavily influenced the author John Hale whose novel of *The Whistle Blower* not only involves the murder of a GCHQ worker made to look like suicide, but also a sub-plot about an employee who is exposed as a paedophile and a Soviet spy.

The events detailed in this chapter proved influential on the film-makers of the British conspiracy cycle. However, it is important to reflect not just on the events themselves, but also on the extent to which the film-makers' ideas were shaped by the media. While declassified files and other sources continue to provide modern historians with a more accurate depiction of the political landscape of the 1980s, we must acknowledge that the perception of the film-makers and the general public at that time was not necessarily shaped by an objective recording of the events. During the 1980s, serious study of intelligence fought for credibility with 'exposé merchants' like *Daily Express* journalist Chapman Pincher, who published eight books on the intelligence services between 1978 and 1990.<sup>74</sup> Pincher was ubiquitous in all things related to the secret state, regularly peddling stories of scandal in high office, Soviet subversion and the misdeeds of the intelligence community, with information gleaned from insiders. E.P. Thompson described the journalist unflatteringly as 'a kind of official urinal in which ministers and intelligence and defence chiefs could stand patiently leaking'. This provides clear evidence

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew, 2010. 712.

<sup>72</sup> Aldrich, 2011. 382.

<sup>73</sup> Bloom, 2015. 166.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

of the disdain with which journalists were regarded by academics on matters of security.<sup>75</sup> Pincher's work has a markedly egocentric quality in which he presents himself as the British equivalent of Woodward and Bernstein (the two journalists of *All the President's Men* fame whose dogged journalism exposed the Watergate scandal). His one-man crusade was to provide the public with details of what he had unearthed about the 'appalling penetration of Whitehall' by Soviet agents.<sup>76</sup> In 1985's *The Secret Offensive*, Pincher claimed that 10% of all trade union officials were members of the Communist Party and therefore taking orders from Moscow. The close links forged between the unions and the Labour Party meant that, according to Pincher, should there be a Labour victory in the 1987 election, then the party could be effectively controlled by the Soviets.<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to note that author Frederick Forsyth had theorised about the same scenario in 1983 and would use it as the narrative catalyst for his novel *The Fourth Protocol*.

The conspiratorial vein running through Pincher's work is similar to the para-political approach to intelligence history that includes the likes of *Lobster* magazine, created by Robin Ramsay and Stephen Dorrill in 1983. The first issue stated its aims as 'a journal about intelligence, parapolitics, state structures and so forth'.<sup>78</sup> Para-political writers such as these are predisposed to view matters of security and intelligence from a conspiratorial perspective, with the default position being that the intelligence services operate with the intention to deceive and conspire against the public. This becomes clear from an address Ramsay gave to members of CND in 1986 on 'rational paranoia': 'the security services are there to ensure that the Left in general and the Labour Party in particular, fails'.<sup>79</sup> Although the para-political approach begins from the subjective view that everything the secret state embarks on is nefarious, it is also useful here because it bears similarities with the style adopted by the conspiracy film-makers: frequently sensationalist, always conspiratorial and invariably paranoid.

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<sup>75</sup> Jack, I. 'Chapman Pincher was Fleet Street's Spycatcher' *The Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> July, 2011.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/01/ian-jack-chapman-pincher-fleet-street>>

<sup>76</sup> Gill, 2012. 16.

<sup>77</sup> Pincher, C. *The Secret Offensive* UK: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985.

<sup>78</sup> Dorrill, S. & Ramsay R. (Eds) *Lobster* Issue 1, September 1983.

<<http://www.8bitmode.com/rogerdog/lobster/lobster01.pdf>>

<sup>79</sup> Ramsay, R. *Politics and Paranoia* UK: Picnic Publishing, 1990. 133.

These are the kinds of text that shaped mass opinion in Britain in the 1980s, and it is to this kind of writing that we must turn to understand the appetites that the British conspiracy film-makers sought to feed. Like the general population, their knowledge and understanding of the secret state was informed by the likes of Pincher, Dorrill and Ramsay as well as others in the same vein like Andrew Boyle, Nigel West and those whose motivation was ‘an impish pleasure in wreaking havoc’.<sup>80</sup> In a reference to the high number of security breaches, a cartoon by Bernard Cookson for the *Evening News* shows a picture of a street cleaner opining to a policeman ‘In the old days it used to be cigarette packets and bus tickets. Now ninety percent of this rubbish is flamin’ microfilm.’<sup>81</sup> Margaret Thatcher’s Press Secretary Bernard Ingham bemoaned journalists’ conspiratorial response to political scandals, and in a speech to the Media Society in November 1985 he referred to the preoccupation with what he called the ‘le Carré syndrome’: the conviction that government is inevitably, irrevocably and chronically up to no good, not to be trusted and conspiratorial.’<sup>82</sup> Ingham blamed this preoccupation on the Watergate scandal, complaining that the Nixon administration had ‘a lot to answer for’.<sup>83</sup> His last comment is noteworthy because just as scandals such as Watergate inspired the Hollywood conspiracy cycle, similar political disgraces also inspired the British film-makers in the following decade.

Until at least the mid-1980s serious academic studies of the security services did not exist, which meant that the public, eager to devour all things espionage-related, were reliant on sensationalist journalism, para-political accounts and fictional texts in order to receive a regular diet of intelligence. The conspiracy film-makers drew on what Michael Denning refers to as the ‘cover stories’ of the day in order to inform their depiction of the security services. The British conspiracy thrillers drew sufficiently on real events to maintain the illusion of reality and while they did not claim that their work was factually accurate, the films themselves served to shape public understanding about the intelligence services in the absence of more objective accounts.

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<sup>80</sup> Moran, 2011

<sup>81</sup> Reproduced in Andrew, 2010. 572.

<sup>82</sup> De Burgh, H. *Investigative Journalism* UK: Routledge, 2008.18.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

From Anthony Blunt to Zircon, the 1980s witnessed a number of what Sked and Cook call high-profile security service ‘banana skins’ that inspired film-makers to respond using the conspiracy form.<sup>84</sup> Reviewing one such production, Harlan Kennedy aptly captured the synergy between fact and fiction: ‘When a ship of state springs leaks as Britain has been doing like a colander in the last four years of the Thatcher government, with old spies being unmasked, top secret documents fed to the press and media, and mini Watergates opening up from Westminster to Wapping – astounding things start happening to that state’s popular culture’.<sup>85</sup> Kennedy’s remarks remind us of how popular culture of the 1980s responded to political events, and to explore the British conspiracy cycle is to return to a period of political turmoil regarding matters of state security. In his book about the acclaimed BBC TV conspiracy drama *Edge of Darkness*, John Caughie believes that the programme reflected an ‘inchoate sense that it was drawing together...anxieties, angers, fears that many of us felt’, and this is also true of any of the British conspiracy case studies, when predominantly left-wing film-makers were responding to the polarizing issues of their day.<sup>86</sup> Whether it was the measures to combat subversion, the nuclear armaments debate or concerns about the ‘special relationship’, the increase in conspiracy-style media coverage about these matters inspired the work of British film-makers who were taking the temperature of an increasingly sceptical nation.

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<sup>84</sup> Sked & Cook, 1993. 44.

<sup>85</sup> Kennedy, H. ‘The Brits Have Gone Nuts’ *Film Comment*, Vol.21, No.4, July/August 1985: 51

<sup>86</sup> Caughie, J. *Edge of Darkness* UK: BFI Publishing, 2007. 5.

## Chapter Five

### Case Study: *Defence of the Realm*

Drury, 1986

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the first of three British case studies, *Defence of the Realm*, released in 1986. It will begin with an examination of the circumstances of the film's origins and development. Thereafter the chapter will examine the film in relation to its American and European forebears, paying attention to the ways in which characterisation, theme and the use of setting were all influenced by the style of its predecessors. In so doing we will assess the extent to which *Defence of the Realm* deviates from the Hollywood and European traditions in order to forge a style that is distinctly British. Where relevant, reference will be made to contextual details that have been introduced in Chapter Four.

The nefarious lengths to which a government would stoop in the name of national security is the fundamental question posed in *Defence of the Realm*. In comparison with the other case studies in this thesis, *Defence of the Realm* is the closest in style and tone to the Hollywood conspiracy productions. The director, producer and the screenwriter looked repeatedly to the Hollywood cycle for inspiration in terms of narrative and visual style. *Defence of the Realm* bears particular similarities to *The Fourth Protocol*: both films use the stationing of nuclear arms and the 'special relationship' as a narrative catalyst. However, both films are ultimately more concerned with the conduct of the British security services and an undemocratic government.

*Defence of the Realm* is set in 1985 and begins with an investigation by tabloid journalist Nick Mullen (played by Gabriel Byrne) who is investigating a Profumo-like sex scandal involving MP Dennis Markham, a call-girl and an East German cultural attaché who may or may not be a spy.<sup>1</sup> Markham is also in the headlines for speaking out against American

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<sup>1</sup> The details of the scandal are deliberately similar to the so-called Profumo affair from 1961 in which Harold MacMillan's Minister of State for War John Profumo was engaged in a brief sexual affair with 19 year old freelance model and topless showgirl named Christine Keeler. The story evolved into a national security scandal when it was revealed that at the same time Keeler was involved in a sexual relationship with a Soviet naval attaché named

nuclear arms recently stationed on British soil. Mullen's colleague and friend Vernon Bayliss (Denholm Elliot) suspects that Markham is being framed, but soon after pursuing this line of enquiry Bayliss dies in mysterious circumstances. Mullen's suspicions are aroused following his friend's death and as he delves deeper, he unearths a conspiracy involving an averted nuclear disaster at an American air base in East Anglia. Mullen soon finds an ally in Markham's secretary Nina Beckman (Greta Scacchi) and their investigation brings them into contact with what Tim Slessor calls the 'Whitehall Loop': the forces of the state closing ranks and going to any means to prevent Mullen from exposing the government's treachery.<sup>2</sup>

By the time that production began on *Defence of the Realm* in 1985, a deep rooted sense of cynicism was evident on British television.<sup>3</sup> This fact was noted at the time by journalist and media scholar Julian Petley, who drew comparisons with the American conspiracy cycle, noting that 'the current mood of unease in Britain...seems to be giving rise to a British strain of the genre'.<sup>4</sup> The film followed in the wake of seminal television productions which also engaged with the nuclear debate, most notably *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) which explored the dubious practices of the nuclear industry, and *Threads* (BBC, 1984) which confronted primetime audiences with an unflinching portrayal of a contemporary Britain struggling to come to terms with the aftermath of nuclear apocalypse. These productions, as well as the successful television adaptations of John le Carré's novels, were feeding audiences a distinctive British diet of conspiracy.<sup>5</sup> It is important that *Defence of the Realm* was defined by Petley as 'Britain's first fully fledged contemporary paranoia movie', because while the sub-genre had already proved successful on television, this was the first British conspiracy thriller to be released in cinemas.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Petley dubs the film a 'paranoia movie' is also indicative of the

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Yevgeny Ivanov, prompting fears that classified government information might have found its way to the Kremlin. See; Knightley, P & Kennedy, C. *An Affair of State: The Profumo Case and the Framing of Stephen Ward* UK: Jonathan Cape, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Slessor, T. *Lying in State*. UK: Aurum Press Ltd, 2008. 2. For a detailed explanation of the 'Whitehall Loop' see Chapter Four.

<sup>3</sup> Angelini, S. 'Cold War Spies' *BFI Screenonline*, n.d. <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1008415/index.html>>

<sup>4</sup> Petley, J. 'Intelligence Tests' *Association Independent Producers & Co. (Periodical)*, No.55, May 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, H. 'The Brits Have Gone Nuts' *Film Comment*, Vol.21, No.4, July/August 1985: 51

<sup>6</sup> Petley, J. 'Defence of the Realm' *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 622, November 1985.

heritage it owes to the American productions, since these films are frequently referred to as paranoia films by scholars.<sup>7</sup>

*Defence of the Realm* marked a fusion of the American and European styles of political thriller because, as this chapter will show, the creative team of director David Drury, producer Lynda Myles and screenwriter Martin Stellman, cite not only the films of the American cycle as important in providing inspiration for their film, but also the work of Costa-Gavras and Francesco Rosi.<sup>8</sup> This pedigree endows the film with a high degree of what film scholar Steve Neale describes as generic verisimilitude.<sup>9</sup> The ways in which *Defence of the Realm* blends American and European styles reminds us of the hybridized nature of the thriller genre, constantly evolving and absorbing new influences.<sup>10</sup> *Defence of the Realm* therefore marks what we might consider a ‘third-way’ for the cinematic conspiracy thriller: a hybrid film that was distinctly British.

Before studying the influence of Hollywood and Europe, we will begin with an examination of the film’s origins. As we have seen in the Introduction, Grahame Petrie reminds us that there are those who eschew the exploration of a film’s journey to the screen, preferring to evaluate the product itself.<sup>11</sup> However, through attaining a deeper understanding of the film-makers’ personal political ideologies, we can more fully appreciate the final product, and *Defence of the Realm* began as an original screenplay that was itself a subjective interpretation of the political landscape as it stood in 1985.

Screenwriter Martin Stellman had a number of films to his name, most notably *Quadrophenia* (Roddam, 1979). While that film is not a conspiracy thriller, it established Stellman’s proclivity for anti-Establishment narratives.<sup>12</sup> Stellman recalls the feelings of political frustration that gave him the inspiration for *Defence of the Realm*, and explains how

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<sup>7</sup> See; Pratt, R. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* USA: University Press of Kansas, 2001. 124. and Shaw, T. *Hollywood’s Cold War* UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 254.

<sup>8</sup> Barrowdough, S. ‘In Britain Now’ *Films & Filming*, 1985: 191

<sup>9</sup> Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood* UK: Routledge, 2000. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Petrie G., *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader* Barry Keith Grant (Ed). UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Set against the musical backdrop of *The Who’s* eponymous concept album, the film focusses on the story of Jimmy, a teen in 1960s Britain who lives a drug-fuelled fantasy life, attaining satisfaction only through the ‘Mod’ counter culture. See; [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079766/synopsis?ref\\_=tt\\_stry\\_pl](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079766/synopsis?ref_=tt_stry_pl)

he sought inspiration from the ways in which the Hollywood conspiracy film-makers used mainstream film as a means of social comment:

It was precisely ...*All The President's Men*, *The Parallax View*, *The Conversation*, *Three Days of the Condor* that inspired me. It seemed to me extraordinary that the Americans could make these kinds of film - films that for the most part I loved and admired - and yet in the UK we had no real tradition of these kinds of films. We didn't quite share the Americans' natural distrust of government which I believe dates back to the American Revolution and the throwing off of colonial power and is enshrined in the Constitution that came out of that Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

While Stellman is correct that the British conspiracy thriller cycle lagged behind its American cousin in cinemas, in other ways it did not. As we have already seen, Greene, le Carré and Deighton were casting a cynical eye over the methods of government some twenty years before the British conspiracy thriller emerged in cinemas in the 1980s. It is also worth remembering that the kind of political scandals that blighted the American government during the 1960s and 1970s which gave rise to the Hollywood cycle, did not emerge in Britain until later. Specifically, the conspiracy form was adopted by British left-wing film-makers as a response to political controversies that were largely attributed to the Conservative government and Thatcherism. The difference was that British film-makers were responding to different contributory factors at a later time than their American counterparts. Stellman's comment about a lack of tradition also ignores the fact that television had been swifter in responding to the prevailing mood. Series like 1978's *The Sandbaggers* (Various, Yorkshire Television 1978) or *Mr Palfrey of Westminster* (Various, Thames Television 1984-85), as well as the seminal *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (Irvine, BBC 1978), were broadcasting messages of state duplicity and government expediency into people's homes before mainstream cinema.

As well as attempting to follow the American tradition, Stellman was also troubled by what he perceived to be an undemocratic state:

We seemed in the UK to have rather too much trust in and too cosy a relationship with government, that is, until Margaret Thatcher came along. There was something in her hectoring tone, the highly interventionist character of her

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<sup>13</sup> Stellman, M. E-mail to the author, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

government, the upper crust voice she adopted her hatred of organized labour and 'society', that made some of us feel a powerful disquiet about our country and our government.<sup>14</sup>

This is reminiscent of the disquiet that Pakula felt about American democracy, wanting his paranoia trilogy to 'capture a sense of vague doubt about the ethical integrity of the United States.....democracy was only an illusion.'<sup>15</sup> As film historian Mark Duguid notes, in the 1980s the time was right for 'left-leaning dramatists' to use British television and cinema to make their case against the government just as Hollywood film-makers had done in the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Stellman's comment about Mrs Thatcher's 'upper crust voice' suggests that her public persona was affectation, and this perception is indicative of the class antagonism that is a recurring feature in the British conspiracy thrillers. On this point, the film critic Roger Ebert observed how *Defence of the Realm* used the conspiracy form 'as a way of dramatizing the class distinctions that still exist in Britain'.<sup>17</sup> Typically for the genre, the film is populated with characters from the ruling elite in conflict with the working class everyman who is being manipulated by the state. In *Defence of the Realm* the fictional newspaper *The Daily Dispatch* is run by Establishment figures, while the journalists are depicted as working class. Fulton MacKay (as the paper's owner Victor Kingsbrook) was well known to British audiences for playing dour authoritarians, while Frederick Treves (playing the editor, Arnold Reece) had made a successful career out of playing senior military figures, politicians and gentry on television.

To create *Defence of the Realm's* antagonist, Stellman focussed on relationship between the government and the security services. As we have seen in Chapter Four, a number of security controversies were interpreted by the left as the excessive powers of the intelligence services indulged by a prime minister infatuated with secrecy. This view was shared by Stellman, who perceived that 'the secret services were virtually unaccountable and the power of civil servants over elected politicians disproportionate... with Thatcher, there was a kind of toxic convergence and we could see things for the first time as they

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, Jared. *Alan J. Pakula: His Films and His Life* USA: Back Stage Books, 2005.125.

<sup>16</sup> Duguid, M. 'Conspiracy Drama' *BFI Screenonline*, n.d.  
<<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/524081/index.html>>

<sup>17</sup> Ebert, R. 'The Whistle Blower' *rogerebert.com*, 21<sup>st</sup> Aug. 1987  
<<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-whistle-blower-1987>>

truly were'.<sup>18</sup> Stellman's final point here suggests that the writer placed himself – just like the conspiracy hero – at the centre of events, one of the few who had the foresight to comprehend what was 'really going on'. The 'toxic convergence' to which he refers was at its peak as he worked on the script in 1983-4. Intermediate range nuclear missiles from America were being established on British soil, while protestors kept candle lit vigil at the perimeter fences of American air force bases. For the film-makers, this fostered a feeling of 'colonial melancholia': grieving the loss of British identity and autonomy, believing that too much power and influence had been subordinated to the special relationship with the Americans.<sup>19</sup>

Though the presence of the American military is a prominent feature of *Defence of the Realm*, Stellman does not apportion as much blame to American imperialism as other British films within the cycle do. Instead, his antagonist remains an overzealous, disproportionately powerful intelligence community. In this way, the central dilemma in *Defence of the Realm* is a resolutely domestic one for which the British government are to blame. Stellman recalls that 'I began to think of a 'state within the state' that made the real decisions and decided what was in the national interest and what was not, but in fact pursued its own reactionary self-interest'.<sup>20</sup> We should remember that Stellman was writing during the so-called 'year of the security scandal', at a time when particular focus was paid to reactionary fears of Soviet subversion.<sup>21</sup> This has echoes in the film's references to the characters of Bayliss and Markham having been members of the Communist Party in their youth. It also resonates with the enduring story of the Cambridge spies, and the much publicized belief that the Establishment still harboured former 'Reds' at its heart. It was precisely Stellman's depiction of the security services that drew producer Lynda Myles to the project. Like the writer, Myles was interested in what the film was trying to say about the secret state and about where the real power lay within Whitehall, and she shared Stellman's desire to raise questions for the audience about 'the state within the state...about who actually controls Britain'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stellman, M. E-mail to the author, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Fisher, M. 'The Smiley Factor' *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2, Winter 2011. 37- 42.

<sup>20</sup> Stellman, M. E-mail to the author, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew, C. *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* UK: Penguin, 2010. 639.

<sup>22</sup> Myles, L. Interview with the author, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

Feeling a sense of outrage over Margaret Thatcher's public posturing and concern over the unaccountability of the intelligence community, Stellman needed a catalyst for the narrative. He found this in an article written for CND by E.P Thompson, in which the renowned historian and senior anti-nuclear campaigner recounted the story of an American bomber that had crash landed in Britain in the 1950s carrying its nuclear payload.<sup>23</sup> (There were in fact two cases of this kind at that time, and it is difficult to identify which one influenced Stellman.) CND had discovered documents about an accident that had occurred in 1958, when an American B-47 nuclear bomber caught fire in East Anglia. The accident almost went undiscovered until a team of nuclear scientists working at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in Aldermaston discovered highly radioactive readings in local plant life. Upon further investigation, a pattern of contamination emerged around the runway at the USAF Base where bombers were on 'Reflex Alert'. The findings were reported in 1961 to the Head of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, but the USAF Base Commander denied that the bomber had been carrying a nuclear weapon at the time of the accident. In 1979 it emerged that the British and American governments had agreed as early as 1956 to deny that nuclear weapons were present in any accident involving American nuclear bombers stationed in the UK. This agreement only surfaced when details of another crash at the USAF Base at Lakenheath in 1956 were revealed in an American newspaper.<sup>24</sup> In this second event, an American B-47 bomber crash landed into a storage depot containing nuclear weapons. Though no detonation took place, the potential risk was clear.<sup>25</sup>

The secrecy and subterfuge surrounding these incidents inspired Stellman to exploit the idea of conspiracy within government and the military. Furthermore, details about the hazards of nuclear power made *Defence of the Realm* relevant for audiences, and capitalized on the recent success of other nuclear-themed conspiracy productions on television. It is significant that real-life locations such as Thetford and Brandon are mentioned in

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<sup>23</sup> Drury, D. Interview with the author, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>24</sup> 'Broken Arrow Cover Up in the UK' *Centre for Public Environmental Oversight*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1996  
<<http://www.cpeo.org/lists/military/1996/msg00205.html>>

<sup>25</sup> Declassified Memorandum to Commander-in-Chief Curtis LeMay. *National Security Archive*. George Washington University n.d.  
<[http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/NC/nh4\\_1.gif](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/NC/nh4_1.gif)>

Stellman's script, because both are less than ten miles from the Lakenheath base where the 1956 accident occurred. The film does not go so far as to mention the base by name, though the inference is very clear and the links to the averted disasters of the past are deliberate. During one sequence in which Mullen is investigating leads for his story, he telephones an American base commander who refers to the 'Reflex Alert' policy that put F1-11 fighter planes on a state of permanent readiness. Such details provide *Defence of the Realm* with a high degree of faction that then serve to make the boundaries of fact and fiction more nebulous. As we have seen, this is an important feature of the British conspiracy thriller because audiences are encouraged to equate real events with the on-screen faction that the film-makers present. In an attempt to add further realism, the film-makers sent a copy of the script to the Pentagon in order to secure support for the film and gain access to secure areas for research and filming purposes.<sup>26</sup> Given the *Defence of the Realm's* plot, this seems a perplexing request to have made in the first place, and it comes as little surprise to learn that no support was forthcoming from the American authorities.<sup>27</sup>

Stellman's script was optioned by David Puttnam's Enigma Films, with Lynda Myles assigned to produce the film, and David Drury was chosen to direct. Drury was a young film-maker from Leeds with a growing body of work, though *Defence of the Realm* would be his first full-length feature film. Drury was an award-winning documentary maker and Putnam hoped that he would exploit his documentary roots to imbue the film with a sense of realism (enhancing the faction from a stylistic point of view).<sup>28</sup> Certainly the critics noted how Drury's use of the camera gave the film a more intimate feel, and we will explore this aspect in more detail presently.<sup>29</sup> Like Myles, Drury quickly saw the potential in Stellman's screenplay. However, both producer and director agreed that the script (over 200 pages in its original form) was too unwieldy to bring to the screen. They

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<sup>26</sup> Myles, L. Interview with the author, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2012. See also *Defence of the Realm Featurette*. Kulture Vulture Productions Ltd, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *Defence of the Realm Original Press Brochure* UK: Rank Film Distributors Ltd, 1985.

<sup>29</sup> Kempley, R. 'Defence of the Realm' *The Washington Post*, 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1987.  
< [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley\\_a0cab.e.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley_a0cab.e.htm) >

also felt that the zeal of Stellan's anti-government agenda bordered on agitprop and, as a result, might alienate a mainstream audience.<sup>30</sup>

The original screenplay began with the story of the cover up at the nuclear air base but ended with tanks on the streets of London and a *coup d'état*. As the director diplomatically remarked, he believed that the original script 'needed radical trimming'.<sup>31</sup> Drury evoked the political thrillers he aspired to, 'If you look at *Z* or *State of Siege*, each set against actual *coups d'état*, it seemed fantastical; if anything a projection of a possible future'.<sup>32</sup> Like the films of Costa-Gavras, Drury was keen that *Defence of the Realm* should remain rooted in the realities of life at the time, rather than forecasting the future. For him it was important that they 'go to the heart of things as they stand at the moment. Tap into a mood, which we both shared. I found that the tone spoke directly to my own mood'.<sup>33</sup> The mood that the film spoke to resulted from the contextual events that we have already explored, and Drury's perception of those events is typical of the milieu's para-political left-wing sensibility. Drury was looking for a project that would provide him with the means to deliver a creative response to Conservative policies of nuclear defence and the measures adopted to combat subversion. Specifically, he recalls the following events as personal motivations for his involvement with the film:

We had just come out of the Falklands conflict which had been controversial. We had the Women's Movement protesting at Greenham Common about American Airbases. We had the miners' strike and the Battle of Orgreave. We had several high profile cases involving the alleged contravention of the Official Secrets Act. All of this fuelled dissent and suspicion of the Thatcher Government. The time was ripe for a political thriller.<sup>34</sup>

While *Defence of the Realm* does not address the specific issue of the miners' strike, Drury saw clashes such as those at Orgreave as epitomising the inflexibility and brutality of the government's response to civil unrest and apparent subversion.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Drury, D. Interview with the author, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Moran, C. 'The Pursuit of Intelligence History: Methods, Sources, and Trajectories in the United Kingdom' *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 55, No. 2: 33-55.

Drury, Myles and Stellman shared the conviction that the conspiracy form was the most effective means of addressing these political issues, and their collective appreciation of the European and American conspiracy cycles gave them the means by which a British hybrid might be achieved. Critics have favourably compared *Defence of the Realm* to three of the most influential Hollywood films: *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *All the President's Men*.<sup>36</sup> However, what has not been examined before is the debt that *Defence of the Realm* owes to the European conspiracy cycle.<sup>37</sup> Drury recalls that while he was working on the film he screened *Three Days of the Condor* repeatedly, as well as *Seven Days in May*, *Z*, *State of Siege* and *Missing*. 'I was consuming that a lot at the time', he recalls.<sup>38</sup> There was also a screening of Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses* for the cast and crew before filming began, as well as during the shoot.<sup>39</sup> The qualities that made the European films appealing to Drury and which he hoped would inspire others on the production are the same qualities that are evident in the Hollywood paranoia cycle. It is ironic that the Hollywood films contain attributes more usually associated with European sensibilities: the slow-moving character-driven labyrinthine plots, a fatalistic ending, and the loss of faith in the domestic systems of power and control. These features recur in the thrillers of Rosi and Gavras, and Rosi's belief that 'the audience should not be just passive spectators' is a principle that runs through the work of both European film-makers.<sup>40</sup> The usually passive mainstream cinema-goer is encouraged to engage with more serious political debate than is typically found in mainstream cinema, and certainly this is what the film-makers intended with *Defence of the Realm*.

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<sup>36</sup> For comparisons with the Hollywood cycle see Duguid, M. 'Conspiracy Drama' *BFI Screenonline*, n.d. <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/524081/index.html>>; Ebert, R. 'Defence of the Realm.' *rogerebert.com*, 6<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1987 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/defense-of-the-realm-1987>>; Kempley, R. 'Defence of the Realm.' *The Washington Post*, 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1987. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley\\_a0cabe.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley_a0cabe.htm)>

<sup>37</sup> Barrowdough, S. 'In Britain Now' *Films & Filming*, 1985: 191 -194

<sup>38</sup> Drury, D Interview with the author 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

<sup>39</sup> Barrowdough, 1985. 191-194

<sup>40</sup> Crowds, G, and Georgakas, D. 'The Audience Should Not Be Just Passive Spectators: An Interview with Francesco Rosi' *Cinéaste* vol.7, No.1, 1975. 6.

At the same time that the British conspiracy thriller was emerging in cinemas, Francesco Rosi told *Cineaste* magazine about the responsibility of a film-maker 'to understand in advance social events in his country'.<sup>41</sup> We have seen how Martin Stellman believed that he began to 'see things as they really were', and while this may well be the case, he did not do so before his contemporaries were also exploring the same sense of disquiet in literature and on television. So despite the foresight that Rosi hopes film-makers might possess, *Defence of the Realm* is a reactive rather than a proactive film. Stellman, Drury and Myles found their inspiration on the front pages of the daily news and shaped their film in response, rather than pre-empting a specific political situation. Therefore we might consider *Defence of the Realm* as indicative rather than interrogative: it captures the general climate of disquiet rather than penetrating a precise issue of the day. This quality makes the film less confrontational than much of Rosi's work, as does the refusal to engage with a specific political situation. *Defence of the Realm* remains more of a generic exploration of a mood (to use Drury's term) than a direct engagement with the nuclear question or the debate about the security services.

Drury was keen to make a film that was rooted in human drama rather than the thriller genre's typical subordination of character to plot. *Defence of the Realm* uses the story of journalist Nick Mullen in order to address political concerns, but in doing so it conforms to cultural historian Michael Denning's conclusion that the spy thriller is reductive, condensing a complex political situation into the ethical struggle of good against evil.<sup>42</sup> The political complexities of *Defence of the Realm* are reduced to Mullen's personal investigation and his own relationship with the security services. Initially Mullen is an apathetic tabloid hack reporting on banal stories for *The Daily Dispatch* ('Nice piece about the bingo winner, Nick', says one colleague). Like Joe Frady in *The Parallax View*, Nick's actions ultimately cost him his life but earn him a moral redemption that atones for his initial apathy. However, while he appears to win the battle against the conspiracy, the film-makers infer that he loses the war against endemic state corruption. What both films do is present the audience with the cinematic version

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<sup>41</sup> Crowds, G. and Robiony Manisco, F. 'Personalizing Political Issues: An Interview with Francesco Rosi' *Cineaste* Vol.12, No.2 (1982). 42

<sup>42</sup> Denning, M. *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* UK: Routledge & Kegan, 1987.14.

of the literary *bildungsroman*, representing the journey of discovery of the hero – or in the case of the conspiracy thriller, the anti-hero journalist from ignorance and apathy to *anagnorisis*, the moment of critical discovery or revelation.<sup>43</sup>

Matthew Ehrlich asserts that journalists in film traditionally represent ‘a shining beacon of truth’ against large scale corporations or corrupt governments.<sup>44</sup> While this may be the case generally, characters like Mullen or Frady are presented as flawed anti-heroes rather than indefatigable crusaders. Pakula described Frady as ‘the totally rootless modern man’, and we can see that both he and Mullen are marginalized characters who live and work on the periphery of society.<sup>45</sup> Even when they are eventually compelled to act, their motivation is not altruistic as much as driven by an anti-authoritarian wilfulness. Ehrlich’s assessment of journalists in American film focuses on their heroic aspects, describing such stories as David and Goliath tales.<sup>46</sup> However, continuing this analogy, in the case of the British conspiracy thriller *David* is a tainted, self-serving rebel, while the government *Goliath* is only partially defeated; the pervasive corruption endures. This darker tone was noted by film critic Stephen Murray who compared *Defence of the Realm* to *All the President’s Men*: ‘Think of *All the President’s Men* if Ben Bradlee had died in mysterious circumstances and Katherine Graham had thrown Bernstein and Woodward...to Nixon’s Praetorian Guard or CIA’.<sup>47</sup> In this way, *Defence of the Realm* offered the 1980s audience a uniquely British perspective on the conspiracy genre as well as adding an alternative dimension to the conspiracy form: a bleaker quality than is seen in some of the American films.<sup>48</sup> Murray’s remarks remind us that the hero is overwhelmed by the conspiracy, whereas in *All the President’s Men* the implication is that the journalists will continue their crusade in the future. Despite this contrast, Drury’s presentation of the work of journalists is an

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<sup>43</sup> Aronoff, Myron J. *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics*. UK: St. Martin’s, 1999. 108.

<sup>44</sup> Ehrlich, M. *Journalism in the Movies* University of Illinois Press, 2004. 116.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, Jared. *Alan J. Pakula: His Films and His Life* USA: Back Stage Books, 2005.127.

<sup>46</sup> Ehrlich, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Murray, S. ‘Defence of the Realm’ *epinions*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2002

<[http://www.epinions.com/review/defense\\_of\\_the\\_realm\\_vhs\\_1999\\_contemporary\\_dassics/content\\_71288524420](http://www.epinions.com/review/defense_of_the_realm_vhs_1999_contemporary_dassics/content_71288524420)>

<sup>48</sup> The Hollywood conspiracy cycle is populated with films which offer a variety of positive and negative conclusions. In *Seven Days in May* (Frankenheimer, 1964) nuclear war is averted and normality restored; in *All the President’s Men* (Pakula, 1976), the heroic journalists defeat a corrupt president; in *Capricorn One* (Hyams, 1979) a lunar landing conspiracy is averted and the whole truth emerges. However in the more downbeat ending of *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974) the hero fails to defeat the conspirators and suffers a mental collapse; in *Three Days of the Condor* (Pollack, 1975), the hero partially foils the conspiracy but with a seed of doubt about his future safety sown.

affectionate one, and *Defence of the Realm* takes the time to depict scenes devoid of dialogue in which Mullen researches his story and follows various leads. These sequences are reminiscent of the scene from *All the President's Men* (discussed in Chapter One) in which Woodward and Bernstein fastidiously thumb through the archives of the Library of Congress. For modern audiences these moments might appear anachronistic: spiral notebooks, HB pencils and feverish foraging through rows of manila files. However, what they establish is that while Mullen may be representative of the 'rootless modern man', his meticulous work in pursuit of the story ennobles him, and this is used as means of earning him the audience's sympathy.

A further journalistic dimension unique to *Defence of the Realm* is the lack of the clichéd curmudgeonly-but-compassionate editor that we find in Pakula's *All the President's Men* or *The Parallax View*. In *Defence of the Realm* the paper's proprietor, Victor Kingsbrook, is implicated in the conspiracy through his complicity with the government. Unlike its American predecessors, this particular aspect of the British conspiracy thriller does not champion journalism as a beacon for the principles that government has abandoned. Frequent references are made to Kingsbrook's Conservative allegiances, which reinforce the sense of faction by alluding to a right-wing conspiracy that was a recurring feature in contemporary para-political accounts. Later in the film Mullen learns that his story will not be published and that Kingsbrook has known about the conspiracy all along. With this information comes the inference that the proprietor is in collusion with the security forces. So in stark contrast to its American forebears, *Defence of the Realm* implies that there is connivance between news media and the secret state. The film raises the question that if the traditional champion of decency and justice – the Fourth Estate - is compromised, from where will the heroes emerge?

This quality emphasizes a key message within the British cycle: the state is more powerful than individual agency, reminding us of Melley's definition of agency panic discussed in Chapter One. In this way, the genre is Kafkaesque because the individual is subordinated to the needs of the organization or the state.<sup>49</sup> The protagonist of the British conspiracy thriller can never fully comprehend the extent of the conspiracy that is

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<sup>49</sup> Pratt, R. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* USA: University Press of Kansas, 2001. 130.

perpetrated, and Nick Mullen is no exception. The fact that he is an ocnophobic protagonist can be in no doubt.<sup>50</sup> He begins the film as a rather unscrupulous hack, contrasting with his idealistic colleague Vernon Bayliss, who sarcastically goads Mullen to not ‘let the truth get in the way of a good story’. Bayliss is the more obvious protagonist to investigate the conspiracy. He is a dedicated, ethical man but is driven to alcoholism by his sense of failure and exasperation at the political corruption that he writes about. The character is more in the tradition of Ehrlich’s analysis of journalists in film and is played by Denholm Elliot (winning a Best Supporting Actor BAFTA for his role) who endows the character with deep sympathy. It is only following Bayliss’ death in mysterious circumstances that Mullen is compelled to act. At this point in the film Mullen adopts the mantle of the conspiracy hero (or rather anti-hero) as defined by Cawelti and Rosenberg.<sup>51</sup> His elevation to the role of hero consumes him with feelings of superiority, loneliness and resentment. Like Joe Frady before him, Mullen feels superior to his colleagues and peers because only he can see things as they really are, but when his concerns are dismissed as paranoia by his colleagues and superiors, he is isolated and alienated from those closest to him.

These journalist characters follow in the tradition of the American cycle, while the European conspiracy thrillers that influenced *Defence of the Realm* are more interested in systems of power rather than character-driven narratives.<sup>52</sup> Notwithstanding its empathetic characterisation, *Defence of the Realm* delivers a troubling social message about Man’s relationship with the bureaucratic state that owes much to the European conspiracy films.<sup>53</sup> Those films concern themselves with characters at odds with the ruling elite and they ‘don’t have a hero with a goal, more an enquiry without end’.<sup>54</sup> The fact that *Defence of the Realm* does not end with a tidy and triumphant conclusion is indicative of the genre. Instead, *Defence of the Realm* suggests that the conspiracy will continue in perpetuity. The fact that many of the European films are ‘enquiries without

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<sup>50</sup> Balints, M. in Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood* UK: Routledge, 2000. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Cawelti, J. & Rosenberg, B. *The Spy Story* USA: University of Chicago Press, 1987.18.

<sup>52</sup> McKibbin, T. ‘Alan J. Pakula: *The Architecture of Power*’ *tonymckibbin.com*  
<<http://tonymckibbin.com/film/alan-j-pakula>>

<sup>53</sup> Snyder, J.R. ‘The Spy Story as Modern Tragedy’ *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol.5, No.3, Summer 1977: 216

<sup>54</sup> Crowdus, G. and Robiony Manisco, F. ‘Personalizing Political Issues: An Interview with Francesco Rosi’ *Cinéaste* Vol.12, No.2 (1982): 42

end' is reflected in the techniques they adopt. Francesco Rosi for example is an enthusiastic proponent of the *cine-inchieste*, literally a 'cinema investigation'.<sup>55</sup> The resulting effect of this approach is to create a fiction film that is indebted to the documentary form.

While it is fair to say that *Defence of the Realm* is not *cine-inchieste* in the true sense, Drury drew on his experience in the documentary field, and employed some of the conventions of *cine-inchieste* in order to imbue his film with a deeper sense of realism. For example, Rita Kempley notes how the 'camera intrudes, elbows and pushes like a Mike Wallace expose'.<sup>56</sup> The effect of this intruding camera is noticeable when Nick and Nina meet secretly on Hungerford Bridge: the camera tightly elbows in on their assignation, creating the sense that the viewer is complicit in a clandestine meeting. The constant movement created by the hand-held camera also draws attention to the bustle around the couple and heightens the sense that they may or may not be under surveillance by the passers-by who jostle along. This effect is also employed in the pub scenes as well as in Mullen's visit to a prison. In each scene these densely populated environments benefit from close-up, hand held techniques because it emphasises a sense of claustrophobia and heightens the sense that the peripheral characters might be eavesdropping.

Not only does *Defence of the Realm's* use of documentary techniques contribute to the sense of conspiracy, so too does the use of *mise-en-scene*, particularly the on-location filming. Drury's deliberate use of real places confirms production designer Jon Dowding's belief that a film's setting should be paid as much attention and direction as the acting or cinematography.<sup>57</sup> *Defence of the Realm's* action takes place predominantly in and around well-known London locations, particularly when Mullen's investigations intensify and he is drawn closer to the corridors of Whitehall. Other scenes set around the air force base take place in the East Anglian countryside. Whether rural or urban, the setting does not

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<sup>55</sup> Moliterno, G. 'Francesco Rosi' *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 26, May 2003.

<<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/rosi/>>

<sup>56</sup> Kempley, R. 'Defence of the Realm' *The Washington Post*, 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1987.

<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley_a0cabe.htm)

[srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley\\_a0cabe.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/defenseoftherealmpgkempley_a0cabe.htm)> Myron Leon 'Mike' Wallace was one of the original correspondents on American television's *60 Minutes* news programme. He was well known for his confrontational reporting style.

<sup>57</sup> Dowding, J. 'The Production Designer' *Cinema Papers*, No.36, 1982: 93

simply root the action geographically. It also reflects the psychology of the characters and is highly suggestive of the film's themes.<sup>58</sup> Film critic Stephen Murray's review of *Defence of the Realm* draws attention to the 'noirish exterior film of nocturnal London' and the fact that the settings are predominantly nocturnal is indicative of the literal and metaphorical darkness in which the characters find themselves, as well as the obfuscation that Drury employs so that the viewer, like Mullen, is kept at arm's length from the true details of the conspiracy.<sup>59</sup> In the same way that Pakula uses Washington in *All the President's Men*, Drury makes effective use of the London architecture to infuse the film with a sense of Mullen versus the Establishment. As Dietrich Neumann's work on film architecture acknowledges that there are times when a film's set dominates character, and this is certainly true in *Defence of the Realm* when locations act as a metaphor for how the characters are overwhelmed by the conspiracy.<sup>60</sup> Neumann also recognises the ways in which buildings can overwhelm the protagonists, when 'everything becomes semiotised'.<sup>61</sup> In these texts characters become insignificant; their power is limited when placed against this leviathan state. For Pakula and his cinematographer Gordon Willis, the state buildings of Washington are monolithic, imposing and suffocating. For Drury and his cinematographer Roger Deakins, the London locations represent the Establishment, with its arcane traditions and grandeur creating a sense of permanency, power and defiance.

Towards the end of *Defence of the Realm*, Mullen is taken by car to be interviewed by the security services. During the journey Drury uses shots of numerous Whitehall buildings by night, establishing that Mullen is being drawn into the lion's den. The sequence instils a sense of danger while also reinforcing the anonymity of these government departments, implying that we cannot comprehend what really occurs behind the 'pillars of power'.<sup>62</sup> The use of real locations in the film is significant because the iconic images associated with the Establishment offer a noteworthy contrast to the use of the same type of settings in the so-called heritage films that were commercially and critically successful at

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<sup>58</sup> Barnwell, J. *Production Design: architects of the screen USA*: Columbia University Press, 2004. 21.

<sup>59</sup> Murray, S. 2002.

<sup>60</sup> Neumann, D. *Film Architecture from Metropolis to Blade Runner* GER: Prestel, 1977. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Myles, L. Interview with the author, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2012. See also *Defence of the Realm Featurette*. Kulture Vulture Productions Ltd, 1985.

this same time. Films like *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Another Country* (1984) and the Merchant Ivory adaptations of E.M. Forster's novels employ *mise-en-scene* to deliberately display the privileged world of the upper-classes. While some film critics have seen these films as a nostalgic look at Old England, others read them as projections of national and cultural regression and 'iconographic references to an oneiric heritage'.<sup>63</sup> Although by no means a heritage film, the use of London locations in *Defence of the Realm* can be read in a similar way as the latter interpretation of the heritage cycle: an attempt to use iconic Establishment settings associated with privilege, class and wealth as a means of drawing attention to unprogressively archaic traditions that for the film-makers seemed to be indicative of aspects of Thatcherism.<sup>64</sup>

The East Anglian locations are apposite to the context of the film because the air force base at Lakenheath which inspired Martin Stellman's script is in the county of Norfolk. Furthermore, this rural coastal region of Britain, with its dramatic fenland, affords Drury and Deakins a perfect visual metaphor for the kind of austere tone that is typical in the British conspiracy thrillers. Like the landscape work of Constable or Northcote Nash (both of whom favoured East Anglia for inspiration), Deakins' work focuses on the seemingly endless horizon and the expanse of sky. The loneliness and isolation of the region that have long been the inspiration for authors and artists is used to great effect to reflect the same loneliness and isolation that are felt by the hero in the conspiracy thrillers. The fens are filmed at dusk and into the night so that a crepuscular dark blue creates an ominous tone. This is established as soon as the film begins with a lone car on a long, straight country road set against a vast dark blue sky. The same effect is used when Mullen drives to East Anglia to visit the air base later in the film. It is interesting to note that Deakins contrasts these expansive exterior shots with much more intimate medium and close up interior shots of Mullen in his car, so that the isolation and loneliness is juxtaposed with a sense of claustrophobia. While urban settings dominate *Defence of the Realm*, the dramatic pastoral landscape creates many of the same effects: characters depicted as physically and metaphorically dwarfed by their surroundings, with

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<sup>63</sup> Dave, P. *Visions of England: class and culture in contemporary cinema* UK: Berg, 2006. 33

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 28.

a colour palette that reinforces both the solitude of the hero and the tone of the film's themes.

Barnwell notes that, as with setting, the use of property can also resonate as a metaphor for character, plot and theme.<sup>65</sup> One of the most effective examples of this in *Defence of the Realm* is when Mullen visits London's famous Garrick Club in order to meet Anthony Clegg (Oliver Ford Davies), a senior figure in the security services. A lengthy establishing shot allows the viewer to take in the Doric columns that flank the wooden doors. Drury employs a high-angle long shot so that Mullen appears dwarfed by the stone checkerboard floor (the checkerboard itself indicative of strategy and scheming). Upstairs he enters the reading room through a door concealed by leather-bound books. A slow zoom allows us to take in the details of Clegg's appearance while emphasising his power over Mullen: wearing a three-piece pin-striped suit and clutching a traditionally British umbrella. Despite these iconic features, Drury himself explained his eagerness to present a vision of the capital that was shorn of British clichés like the red buses and black cabs.<sup>66</sup> His intention was that in removing these kinds of signifiers for the audience he might make the city representative of every seat of authority, so that the message of the film need not be particular to Britain, but applicable to western democracies in general.<sup>67</sup> However, it is debatable whether this objective is adequately achieved, because the use of tourist spots on the Thames, the Parliament buildings and the familiar trappings of Establishment London such as the Garrick Club seem counter-productive to an attempt to avoid British clichés.

The metaphorical use of *mise-en-scene* detailed above is used consistently throughout *Defence of the Realm*. We have already seen how author John le Carré conveys theme through location by using settings that are 'urban ...decaying, broken and disintegrating...and there is little colour.'<sup>68</sup> Similarly, art director Anna Charnley depicts Mullen's flat as a reflection of the character himself in its shabbiness. There is a distinct lack of personal comforts and all evidence of personal relationships or the accoutrements

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<sup>65</sup> Barnwell, J *Production Design: architects of the screen* USA: Columbia University Press, 2004. 81.

<sup>66</sup>Barrowdough, S. 'In Britain Now' *Films & Filming*, 1985: 191-194

<sup>67</sup> Drury, D Interview with the author 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

<sup>68</sup> Monaghan, D. *The Novels of John le Carré: The Art of Survival* UK: Blackwell, 1985. 50.

of family life are entirely absent. The colour scheme is a bland magnolia, the furnishings range from ramshackle to mismatched and functional rather than comfortable. Mullen's apartment is devoid of feminine touches, reminding us once again that the world of the British conspiracy thriller is a lonely and patriarchal one. Elsewhere, the depiction of the newsroom is entirely in contrast to Pakula's iconic vast and brightly lit sound stage version of *The Washington Post* newsroom in *All the President's Men*. In *Defence of the Realm*, the offices of the newspaper are cluttered, drab, smoke filled and dark. This is more in keeping with the newspaper offices in *The Parallax View*, so that the world of the journalist is one in which he is perpetually working in the shadows and kept literally and metaphorically in the dark.

Just as the use of setting is symbolic, so too is the depiction of the film's antagonist: the secret state. The features of setting and property detailed above are used to enhance the depiction of the antagonist so that while there is no Machiavellian figure-head pitted against the hero. Villains are mendacious officials and faceless bureaucrats who lurk menacingly at the periphery of scenes. Here too *Defence of the Realm* bears close relation to Pakula's collaborations with Gordon Willis in the 1970s. Their influence on *Defence of the Realm* results in numerous sequences where the members of the secret state are depicted as unnamed, shadowy figures. They are men in doorways or on escalators whom the audience can see, but cannot easily define. The most effective example of this is when Mullen visits Bayliss' flat, only to find that he is not the first to arrive. We see a point of view shot from Mullen's perspective as he peers through the letterbox: we can see two pairs of feet in polished black shoes that move almost noiselessly across the hallway. A little later in the same scene, once again Mullen's view is obstructed and we too can only glimpse legs or an arm of men in suits. What serves as further evidence of the darker tone of the British conspiracy thriller is the fact that while the antagonist in *The Parallax View* is a shadowy large corporation that is intent on influencing the state, in *Defence of the Realm* it is the state itself. This allows the film-makers to manipulate the audience and establish a labyrinthine world where the viewer is conditioned to become increasingly suspicious of any suited official or civil-servant. The fact that these characters are filmed in the ways detailed here heightens the sense of obfuscation that Drury employs in order to deliberately wrong-foot the viewer. Audiences by this time were attuned to this kind of

depiction of intelligence operatives on screen, not just because of the celebrated Hollywood tradition, but also as a result of the much imitated style of le Carré who depicted the nefarious intelligence services as dull-but-deadly bureaucrats rather than imposing men in black. This meant that by the time *Defence of the Realm* was released, mainstream audiences had been conditioned by literary, cinematic and television representations of the security services.

The debt Drury owes to Pakula's use of obfuscation in depicting the antagonist, and the way in which the setting enhances this depiction, is never clearer than when Mullen meets Nina Beckman on Hungerford Bridge. The scene ends with a long shot of two men, centre screen on Waterloo Bridge, who may or may not be watching Nina and Nick. It is never revealed who these men are, but Drury draws on Pakula's techniques and exploits his audience's familiarity with the genre to leave us in little doubt that these lurking figures are part of the security services. At a test screening of *Defence of the Realm* before its official release, an audience member enquired about this moment, asking Drury if the anonymous figures on the bridge were 'spooks'. Drury explains that this questioner's accurate interpretation 'taught me a very valuable lesson: never underestimate the audience's intelligence. There is a contract with the audience which must never be broken'.<sup>69</sup> The director exploits this 'contract' consistently throughout the film with numerous point of view shots of Mullen seen through a car windscreen or in a rear-view mirror, frequent references suggesting that Mullen feels the ominous weight of surveillance but can never see the watchers.

Both Drury and Pakula also make use of tribunal sequences that depict anonymous committees passing judgement on the hero. These committees are indicative of the 'impersonal functionaries of corporate society' who act against the lonely hero.<sup>70</sup> The tribunal sequence in *Defence of the Realm* reminds us of the film's Kafkaesque qualities: Mullen is processed by the bureaucratic machine as he sits before a panel of three Establishment figures: suited, middle-aged, civil servant types. Producer Myles considers

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<sup>69</sup> Drury, D Interview with the author 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

<sup>70</sup> Ryan, M. & Kellner, D. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. USA: Indiana University Press, 1988. 99.

this one of the most effective scenes in the film precisely because the audience never quite know who these people are.<sup>71</sup> They are filmed only in long shot so that, like Mullen, we are not permitted to know the characters in any depth or detail. Typically the room is dressed with the trappings of the Establishment. It has a prominent chandelier hanging above, while a marble bust seems to survey the events from a corner of the room. The panel sits behind a large highly polished oak table in a dimly-lit, smoky room with opaque glass panels behind them. Drury adds figures moving behind the glass as if to infer the labyrinthine nature of the conspiracy. The men enigmatically ask Mullen ‘How did you vote in the last election?’, ‘Do you consider yourself a patriot?’ and ‘Are you a believer of freedom of information? All information? Freely available over the counter?’ This last question is significant because it is the same argument that was posed to the real-life Ministry of Defence whistle-blower Clive Ponting when interviewed about why he leaked government secrets during an episode of Channel Four’s *After Dark* in May 1987.<sup>72</sup> The sequence is also indicative of Martin Stellman’s original intention which sought to address the issue of unaccountability that he was so concerned with. It is precisely the apparent ordinariness of the conspirators that has the power to unnerve the audience. There is something disquieting in the notion that conspirators are faceless and seemingly asinine, suggesting that the ordinariness of our neighbours, acquaintances and surroundings can mask a malevolent threat.

The themes and messages of *Defence of the Realm*, and its depiction of character and the use of setting, coalesce in the film’s pessimistic conclusion, and this is another quality it shares with its American and European forebears. The slayings of Frady in *The Parallax View*, or Rogas in *Illustrious Corpses*, are indicative of the bleak message about state supremacy that is intended to linger in the audience’s mind as the film concludes. Similarly, in *Defence of the Realm* the film-makers take the decision to kill their heroes in the penultimate scene. Given the way in which this choice challenges the prevailing inclination of mainstream films towards a more crowd-pleasing conclusion, it is unsurprising that Puttnam and the film’s American investors forced the first-time feature

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<sup>71</sup> Drury, D Interview with the author 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

<sup>72</sup> Clive Ponting speaking on *After Dark*. Channel 4, Aired: May 2nd 1987.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-KkeedPV24>>

director to film an alternative ending. However, according to the director, the original ending prevailed because ‘it is the natural and emotionally truthful conclusion’.<sup>73</sup> This kind of conclusion is faithful to the spirit of the rest of the film because the conspiracy form slowly establishes and develops a lingering cynicism that demands a negative ending. The meticulously established depiction of a nefarious intelligence community; the decline of the anti-hero; the *mise-en-scene* and cinematography that reinforce the film’s themes and messages: all these features compel the film towards an inevitably pessimistic conclusion. To have established these aspects over the course of the film, only to foist an incongruous happy ending on it, would have rendered any serious political comment considerably less effective.

Upon *Defence of the Realm*’s release in 1986, critics were quick to note the novelty of the film’s conclusion, clearly recognising the message that there were no depths to which the British government would not sink in order to protect its interests. The film was perceived to be ‘bleaker, more pessimistic’ than some of its American counterparts because it presupposed that the truth would never be uncovered in the British state.<sup>74</sup> The attempt to convey this uncompromising message is one of its strengths and remains scarce in popular cinema.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the effectiveness of the conspiracy form is frequently challenged by academics, but notwithstanding such criticisms, *Defence of the Realm* does attempt to address contemporary political anxieties.<sup>75</sup> Martin Stellman’s vociferous condemnation of the British government leaves us in no doubt about his own intentions for the film. However, his initial vision (culminating in tanks on the streets) was deemed excessive, and the director and producer sought successfully to moderate the screenplay. In making these revisions, however, the confrontational nature of Stellman’s original screenplay is diluted by Drury’s inclusion of a more generalized message about the security forces. The final version depicts politicians as corrupt (not an original concept), while the senior newspaper men are depicted as pusillanimous rather than nefarious. The

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<sup>73</sup> Drury, D Interview with the author 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

<sup>74</sup> Ebert, 1987.

<sup>75</sup> Petley, J. ‘Defence of the Realm’ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 622, November 1985.

most heinous wrong-doing is assigned to an expedient and self-serving intelligence community, because it is they who cover up the scandal by any means necessary. However, since the characters from the intelligence community are depicted as faceless, anonymous bureaucrats, there is no clearly-defined enemy. The film therefore rails against a corrupt state machine but one that is too ill-defined to provide weight to the intended political message.

*Defence of the Realm* does succeed in presenting an atmospheric dramatization of left-wing fears about the secret state, though it shies from proffering solutions or adequately apportioning blame. Owing to the imprecision of any attempted political insight, we might do well to consider *Defence of the Realm* a para-political conspiracy thriller because, though not politically insightful, it is successful at raising questions about covert political activity. One might argue that the film is deliberately not didactic, and in this regard it is in esteemed company: critics refer to the style of the conspiracy thriller as ‘Kafkaesque’, yet few criticize Franz Kafka for a lack of political insight. Instead, the author’s enigmatic style of obfuscation is lauded as the most significant quality of his work (so much so that he has given his name to the technique). So while academics have questioned the usefulness of the conspiracy thriller form, critics and audiences tended to appreciate *Defence of the Realm* for what it was attempting to do, instead of what it did not achieve. The film stands as an example of a mainstream thriller that tries to navigate a potentially fraught course between entertainment and political insight. Like its American and European forebears, its intention was to encourage debate within the confines of mainstream entertainment.

## Chapter Six

### Case Study: *The Whistle Blower*

Langton, 1986

John Hale's original novel of *The Whistle Blower* was published in 1984 and this was followed by a film adaptation in 1986. *The Whistle Blower* tells the story of a conspiracy between Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham and the American security services. In the plot, these organisations are secretly collaborating to counter Soviet subversion within the British intelligence community. While this in itself is not conspiratorial, it emerges that the security services of both nations have committed murder in order to silence staff and civilians who are critical of their methods. In a contrast to *Defence of the Realm*, *The Whistle Blower* focusses exclusively on the work of GCHQ rather than the intelligence services as a whole. Historically, the work of GCHQ has been inextricably linked to Britain's so-called 'special relationship' with the United States<sup>1</sup> and this relationship comes under close scrutiny in the narratives of the novel and the film. Of the three case studies in this thesis, *The Whistle Blower* is the most vociferous in its denunciation of the 'special relationship'. However, as we will see, there is a marked difference in the strength of the criticism between the book and the film versions.

This chapter begins with a synopsis of the plot followed by an examination of the context of the novel. Specifically, this first section will provide details of the ways in which Hale's book used the conspiracy form as a means of reacting to contemporary political events. The second section explores the film adaptation, paying particular attention to the presentation of the Anglo-American relationship and to the reasons why the book and film differ in their treatment of it. As with the other case study chapters, the third section provides an analysis of character and setting. Specifically, we will examine the ways in which these features are used to present a negative message about the British Establishment and the security services. In doing so, comparisons and contrasts will be drawn with the European and American conspiracy cycles. The chapter concludes by

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<sup>1</sup> Aldrich, R. *GCHQ* UK: Harperpress, 2011. 86.

considering the film's critical reception and by evaluating the extent to which *The Whistle Blower* achieved its aims as a conspiracy thriller.

*The Whistle Blower* begins at GCHQ in Cheltenham, with a senior officer briefing staff about the case of Ramsay Dodgson, an employee who has been convicted of spying for the Soviet Union. Later, another member of GCHQ's staff, Bob Jones (Nigel Havers), shares his anxieties about his work as a Russian linguist with his father Frank (Michael Caine). Bob reveals that he has become disillusioned with the methods employed by the intelligence community to combat subversion. Frank dismisses Bob's concerns and reassures him that his work is vital to the security of the nation. The next day Bob is found dead, having apparently fallen from his roof terrace. His death is the latest in a number of 'accidents' to have befallen staff at GCHQ, which are being investigated by a left-wing journalist named Bob Pickett (Kenneth Colley). Pickett contacts Frank in order to pursue his theory of a conspiracy within GCHQ, and despite his reservations about talking to a subversive 'Leftie' (as he calls him), Frank agrees to meet. Before he can do so, Pickett is killed when his car is run off a lonely country road in a well-staged 'accident'. Frank, a former navy serviceman now living a quiet life as a retailer, is suspicious and contacts a former colleague and (apparently) erstwhile member of the intelligence services, Charlie Grieg (Barry Foster).

Grieg admits to being still in the employ of the intelligence services, and, when drunk, tells Frank that American agents killed Bob, believing him to be one of Dodgson's fellow spies. Grieg also informs Frank that the real traitor is an Establishment grandee named Sir Adrian Chapple (John Gielgud). Shortly after learning this, Frank is driven to a stately home to meet a senior member of the intelligence services named Lord (James Fox) and an unnamed government minister (David Langton). The minister warns Frank about the consequences of speaking out publicly about what he has learnt from Grieg. Despite the warning, Frank visits Chapple at his home during the Remembrance Day commemorations, confronts him about his treachery and forces him to sign a confession. Chapple tries to shoot Frank but is killed in the process. Frank realises that Chapple's written confession could be interpreted as a suicide note, and leaves the scene. He walks a short distance to join the service in Whitehall. As Frank walks past the foot of the

cenotaph, the emergency services are seen speeding to the scene of Chapple's 'suicide'. The film concludes with the suggestion that details of Chapple's treachery will emerge after all. However, this is juxtaposed with Bob's remarks from earlier in the film echoing in voice-over as a reminder to the viewer that corruption is endemic in the secret state.

*The Whistle Blower* is perhaps the only mainstream film to date which deals exclusively with GCHQ; a fact that seems remarkable given the public interest in the work of the security services and the public's voracious appetite for espionage fiction.<sup>2</sup> In 2013 the former Director of GCHQ, Sir Ian Lobban, told a House of Commons Select Committee that 'secret does not necessarily mean sinister'.<sup>3</sup> However, as we have seen in Chapter Four, in the early 1980s GCHQ was depicted in the popular press as both secretive and sinister after many details of its work had been revealed by the investigative journalist Duncan Campbell in 1976.<sup>4</sup> Campbell stated at that time that GCHQ was larger than the other security agencies and 'potentially far more sinister... and the implications of its work ultimately more threatening to civil liberty and world peace than all the other agencies put together'.<sup>5</sup>

John Hale wrote the novel *The Whistle Blower* in reaction to the political events described in Chapter Four. When Hale was drafting the book in 1983, GCHQ's work and the reputation of the security services were tarnished by rumour, controversy and embarrassment. The previous year, James Bamford's *The Puzzle Palace* was published, exploring GCHQ's relationship with America's National Security Agency (NSA). Its release was considered 'the final nail in the coffin of any attempt to keep the work in Cheltenham under wraps'.<sup>6</sup> The following year, the Post Office Engineering Union (POEU) published their report *Tapping the Telephone* which was critical of the surveillance that union members were undertaking on behalf of GCHQ. In November 1982 GCHQ

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<sup>2</sup> Aldrich, R. *A Signals Intelligence Timeline*. n.d.

<<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/people/aldrich/vigilant/lectures/gchq/>>

See also: Aldrich, R. *GCHQ* UK:Harperpress,2011. 361.

<sup>3</sup> Owen, P. 'Spy agency chiefs defend surveillance' *The Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2013.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/heads-of-gchq-mi5-and-mi6-appear-before-intelligence-committee-live>>

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, D. 'The Eavesdroppers.' *Time Out*, May 1976: 8-9

<<http://www.duncan-campbell.org/PDF/1976-may-time-out-the-eavesdroppers.pdf>>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. For details of the impact of Campbell's article See Aldrich, R. *GCHQ*. UK: Harperpress, 2011. 361.

<sup>6</sup> Aldrich, 2011. 361.

radio operator Geoffrey Prime was sentenced to thirty-eight years imprisonment having pleaded guilty to seven counts of espionage and three counts of sex offences against children. One of the most controversial events at the site was the trade union ban that occurred in 1983 and which, according to Stephen Dorrill, was the result of pressure from the United States who threatened to ‘take its ball away and stop GCHQ playing a major part in international intelligence’.<sup>7</sup> At the same time Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong explained that despite the concerns of senior Whitehall officials, pressure from Washington was exerted to introduce the controversial polygraph or lie-detector test in Britain.<sup>8</sup> In the following year, disgruntled former GCHQ employees Dennis Mitchell and Jock Kane both tried to publish books detailing what they deemed to be evidence of malpractice in the nation’s gathering of signals intelligence. Throughout these events there was also continuing public interest in a number of suicides of GCHQ personnel, which historians Richard Aldrich, Clive Bloom and Tony Collins have variously linked to KGB recruitment and ‘psyops’.<sup>9</sup>

As a novelist, playwright and award-winning screenwriter, John Hale was politically of the far left.<sup>10</sup> He was inclined to seize on political events that were suggestive of the government’s excessive security policies or indicative of restrictions to civil liberties. Given the fervour of conspiracy that infuses *The Whistle Blower*, and which is a recurring trait in his work, Hale is best understood as para-political writer.<sup>11</sup> By the time the novel was published, Hale was well established as a cultural commentator who was ‘incandescent’ about what he perceived to be injustices committed by the state. As his widow explains, ‘He was anti-Establishment and fought on the side of the people. That’s what he cared about’.<sup>12</sup> Hale established this reputation in the 1960s with work that included a play for Thames Television’s entitled *Light the Blue Touch Paper*. This screenplay

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<sup>7</sup> Dorrill, S. *The Silent Conspiracy* UK: Heinemann, 1994. 472.

<sup>8</sup> *Guardian* 19th September 1983 quoted in ‘The Lie Detector Story’ *The Lobster*, No. 3, 1984. 29.  
< <http://www.8bitmode.com/rogerdog/lobster/lobster03.pdf>>

<sup>9</sup> Aldrich, 2011. 361.

Bloom, C. *Thatcher’s Secret War* UK: The History Press. 2015.166.

Collins, T. *Open Verdict* UK: Sphere Books. 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Hale’s screenplay for *Anne of a Thousand Days* (Jarrott, 1969) was nominated for an Oscar in 1970, and won the Golden Globe in the same year, while his next screenplay for *Mary Queen of Scots* (Jarrott, 1971) was nominated for a Golden Globe the following year. See [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0354942/awards?ref=nm\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0354942/awards?ref=nm_awd)

<sup>11</sup> Langton, S. Interview with the author, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Hale, V. Interview with the author, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014.

explored secret government installations and chemical warfare during the Cold War, all of which were issues that the general public were largely oblivious to but which worried Hale - and which he had researched exhaustively.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1980s, Hale became particularly interested in the security services scandals that had been reported in the media, and wanted to respond by producing a novel that used GCHQ as a means of addressing concerns about state surveillance and the special relationship between Britain and America.

Hale was very clear about the kind of story that he wanted *The Whistle Blower* to be, and the notes from the book's first edition reveal his intentions:

There is an invisible government at work in Great Britain and *The Whistle Blower* is a novel about how it operates. Set in the year of Orwell, in the year the government banned trade unions at GCHQ, it is the story about the confrontation between a private person and all the resources of modern intelligence.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that Hale's notes assert that there 'is' an invisible government reveals Hale's conviction that although his book was fiction the premise for it was not. Like others of the left, he was convinced that sinister and secret forces were at work, implementing large-scale state surveillance of individuals and particularly left-wing groups. The regular stories in the popular press about the security services no doubt underlined this feeling. The second sentence above is also revealing: it was essential to Hale that the novel's publication should coincide with the year of Orwell's acclaimed dystopian vision of Britain. For Hale, the issues surrounding the secret state and the work of GCHQ were indicative of Orwell's dystopian nightmare becoming a reality. Furthermore, just like Orwell's hero Winston Smith, Hale intentionally selected a bland name for his everyman central hero: Jones. The ordinariness of both Smith and then Jones remind us that throughout the conspiracy cycle each narrative explores the ordinary man's conflict with

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. *Light the Blue Touch Paper* was part of ITV's *Armchair Theatre* series: Season 6, Episode 24. 24<sup>th</sup> September 1966, Thames Television; Dir: Charles Jarrott.

See [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0775132/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0775132/?ref=fn_al_tt_1)

<sup>14</sup> Hale, J. *The Whistle Blower* UK: Jonathan Cape, 1984. Dust jacket.

a corrupt, leviathan secret state. Hale's intention was that his novel should reiterate the fears that Orwell had articulated thirty-six years earlier in his seminal book. His purpose – just like Orwell's – was to warn the public about the dystopian measures being adopted stealthily by the state.<sup>15</sup> This reminds us of Martin Stellman's belief that he could 'see things as they really were' when he was writing *Defence of the Realm*. There is the implication that both writers felt the same kind of lonely isolation that is, ironically, typical of the protagonist in the conspiracy thriller: each believed that they were part of a minority who truly understood the implications and impact of the methods employed by Britain's security forces. Both men intended to communicate a warning about this to the British public through the medium of mainstream film.

*The Whistle Blower* was published by Jonathan Cape Ltd in September 1984. In 1985, film producer Geoffrey Reeve secured the rights to the novel for his company Portreeve, which he ran with his son James. Geoffrey Reeve was acquainted with the thriller genre, having produced and directed cinema adaptations of Alastair Maclean's *Puppet on a Chain* (1971) and *Caravan to Vaccares* (1974). He believed that a film adaptation of *The Whistle Blower* had the potential to capitalise on the success of conspiracy-themed television productions.<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Reeve intended to direct the film himself, but eventually Simon Langton was chosen instead because of his experience and critical success with the genre.<sup>17</sup> Langton had directed *The Lost Honour of Kathryn Beck* (CBS, 1984), which was an American television adaptation of *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, produced in West Germany (1975, Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta). Both films were considered 'conspiracy productions',<sup>18</sup> and in a reminder of the lineage of the conspiracy genre, the latter was compared in style and tone to the work of Costa-Gavras.<sup>19</sup> However, more important in confirming Langton's British conspiracy credentials was his direction on the acclaimed BBC adaptation of John le Carré's *Smiley's People* in 1983. The producers hoped that Langton's familiarity with the le Carré milieu could be replicated in *The Whistle Blower*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hale, V. Interview with the author, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014

<sup>16</sup> For a list of British conspiracy television productions see Introduction.

<sup>17</sup> Langton, S. Interview with the author, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Shaw, T. *Cinematic Terror*. UK: Bloomsbury, 2015.119.

<sup>20</sup> Langton, S. Interview with the author, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2012.

Portreeve commissioned John Hale to adapt his novel for the screen. However, in a situation reminiscent of the development of *Defence of the Realm*, the production company rejected the writer's first draft because they were concerned that it was 'too political'. Specifically, the producers objected to the vehement anti-American sentiment, which they asked to be toned down.<sup>21</sup> According to James Reeve, this decision was taken for two reasons: firstly, the producers were concerned that the anti-American angle might hinder the success of the film in the lucrative North American market. Secondly, the producers also believed that Hale's polemic script would alienate mainstream cinema-goers.<sup>22</sup> James Reeve was concerned that the film might 'switch people off who don't want to be sitting there being told too forcibly 'this is how the world works and this is all terrible''.<sup>23</sup> Reeve's reservations remind us of Costa-Gavras' maxim that film-makers 'don't catch flies with vinegar'. Films like *The Whistle Blower*, which carry a political message, must establish an equilibrium between engagement and education. However, Hale was unprepared to make the requisite changes because his views on American imperialism were a crucial motive behind the novel. His aim had been to demonstrate to the public that the stationing of nuclear armaments in Britain, the trade union ban at GCHQ and the use of the polygraph were all symptomatic of American influence over British interests. Unsurprisingly, the author refused to temper this aspect of the script, prompting the producers to recruit an alternative screenwriter, Julian Bond. Geoffrey Reeve had worked with Bond on *The Shooting Party* (Bridges) in 1985. As we will see, the Establishment ambiance that pervades *The Shooting Party* is very close to that of *The Whistle Blower*, and it is likely that Reeve appointed Bond partially for this reason. Furthermore, like Simon Langton, Julian Bond had worked on a television adaptation of a John le Carré novel (*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* for London Weekend Television, though the project was never fully realised). At this point, John Hale's involvement in the adaptation of *The Whistle Blower* ended.

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<sup>21</sup> See Interview with Valerie Hale and the author, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014.  
and Reeve, J. Interview with the author, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Reeve, J. Interview with the author, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Julian Bond was drawn to the film's political message, particularly Hale's ideas about 'an invisible government at work in Great Britain and how it operates'.<sup>24</sup> For Bond, the novel was two separate stories: one dealing with family relationships, the other exploring the intelligence services. The family element in the novel also included Frank's wife and daughter, who are both repeatedly threatened by the American security services. These characters were completely excised in Bond's screenplay in order to focus exclusively on the father and son dynamic.<sup>25</sup> The other reason for the removal of these characters was in order to tone down the criticism of the American security forces that is so prominent in Hale's descriptions of intimidation against the two women but which was of concern to the producers. The antagonist in Bond's film is the shadowy British Establishment and the secret services. In fact, the only American character in the film is a polygraph expert who has no more than five minutes of screen time. It should be noted that the American presence is by no means completely expunged. The British characters make numerous references to the importance of the 'special relationship' and the pressures that it brings. However, in a significant divergence, the film depicts the British government as the aggressor in collusion with the Americans, whereas the novel has the Americans as the more active aggressor coercing their British counterparts. It is interesting that in the process of adapting the novel for the screen perhaps life was mirroring art: Hale wanted his novel to demonstrate how British interests were subordinated to those of America, but in adapting the film American interests – foreign marketing considerations - were taking precedence over the important political message the author had intended.

Hale's negative depiction of the Anglo-American relationship in *The Whistle Blower* was considered by some of the film-makers to be inaccurate. For James Reeve, the special relationship was more nuanced than was evident in Hale's reductive 'polemic 'Brits are good, Americans are bad' narrative'.<sup>26</sup> This was a view shared by director Simon Langton, who identified this as a flaw in the British conspiracy genre generally. Langton argued that the United States government was too frequently used as a scapegoat for British failings. Instead, Langton preferred that his film should focus its criticism squarely at the

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<sup>24</sup> Doyle, T. 'Pages As Pictures' *Films and Filming*, December, 1986: 18-21

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Reeve, J. Interview with the author, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

British government, believing that the anti-American posture was ‘clichéd in thrillers of this kind’.<sup>27</sup> Given the film-makers’ reservations about the anti-American aspects, it is significant that some of film’s most effusive plaudits came from American critics.<sup>28</sup> Far from being aggrieved at any anti-American sentiment that remains in the film, the evidence suggests that many appreciated the adoption of the conspiracy form in order to explore the special relationship.<sup>29</sup> This favourable reaction may be attributable to the fact that the conspiracy tradition was well-established in America.

By the time Langton’s film arrived on American shores in 1987, audiences were accustomed to mainstream film-makers using the conspiracy form as a means of criticizing the government. Furthermore, media stories of American state corruption continued in the 1980s, including the Iran-Contra affair. This scandal, involving government officials in secret arm deals, emerged less than a year before *The Whistle Blower’s* American release and remained in the headlines throughout 1987, giving the film added newsworthiness. Indeed, during American publicity interviews for the film, Michael Caine referred to Iran-Contra, noting what he described as the ‘Kafkaesque’ nature of government that was evident in both America and Britain.<sup>30</sup> It is important that Caine should use this term because film scholar Ray Pratt and director Alan Pakula also refer to the conspiracy form as being ‘Kafkaesque’.<sup>31</sup> The phrase is suggestive of the furtive and labyrinthine nature of the secret state that the American, European and British cycles all attempt to convey on screen using the conspiracy form.

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<sup>27</sup> Langton, S. Interview with the author, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See; Ebert, R. ‘The Whistleblower’ *rogerebert.com* 21<sup>st</sup> August 1987

< <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-whistle-blower-1987>>

Hinson, H. ‘The Whistleblower’ *The Washington Post* 19<sup>th</sup> August 1987.

<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thewhistleblowerpghinson\\_a093e.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thewhistleblowerpghinson_a093e.htm)>

Howe, D. ‘The Whistleblower’ *The Washington Post* 21<sup>st</sup> August 1987.

<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thewhistleblowerpghowe\\_a0b0e3.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thewhistleblowerpghowe_a0b0e3.htm)>

Sullivan, M. ‘The Whistleblower’ *Movie Magazine Review* 16<sup>th</sup> August 1987

< [http://www.shoestring.org/mmi\\_revs/whistle-blower.html](http://www.shoestring.org/mmi_revs/whistle-blower.html)>

<sup>30</sup> Bishop, D. ‘The Films of Michael Caine’ *Vicious Imagery* 27<sup>th</sup> January 1987

<<http://viciousimagery.blogspot.com/2007/01/films-of-michael-caine-52-whistle.html>>

<sup>31</sup> See; Pratt, R. *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* USA: University Press of Kansas, 2001. 130. and

Pakula quoted in Brown, Jared. *Alan J. Pakula: His Films and His Life* USA: Back Stage Books, 2005.125.

We will deepen our exploration of *The Whistle Blower's* Kafkaesque qualities as we now turn our attention to the issue of characterisation. One of the clearest examples of the Kafkaesque nature of *The Whistle Blower* is its presentation of the protagonist. The conspiracy thriller genre in all its forms presents the insurmountable odds faced by an ocnophobic protagonist (explained in the Introduction).<sup>32</sup> The protagonist's investigation results in his *anagnorisis*; his life is irrevocably changed when he is forced to reappraise his perception of the state. In *The Whistle Blower*, it is Bob Jones who typifies this model of protagonist, reaching a disquieting conclusion about his work at GCHQ. In contrast, his father Frank we are told 'doesn't have the stomach for revolution', preferring to accept the *status quo*.<sup>33</sup> However, following Bob's death Frank is compelled to adopt the mantle of ocnophobic protagonist and thereby begins his irreversible journey of discovery. As we have seen in earlier chapters, this journey of discovery is compared to that of the German *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation.<sup>34</sup> By the conclusion, Frank has undergone a 'formation' into the kind of citizen that director Francesco Rosi would have us all become: active participants rather than passive spectators.<sup>35</sup> In *The Whistle Blower*, the death of Frank's son is the catalyst that ultimately leads to his enlightenment, and in confronting Sir Adrian at the end of the film he has truly become an active participant, however reluctantly. Film critic Monica Sullivan suggests that Frank's reluctance to get involved conjures an older vision of 'English stoicism, acceptance and sublimation'.<sup>36</sup> Her comment implies that there is indifference within the British psyche which allows the secret state to flourish unchallenged. The quiet servitude of the everyman like Frank Jones, who is not 'out to change the system', allows the conspirators to exploit his apathy. Sullivan's theory is confirmed by the first line of Hale's novel, which reveals that Frank Jones 'was an ordinary man'.<sup>37</sup> Later in the novel he is described as an 'old sort of Englishman...a kind of 1940s man'.<sup>38</sup> The implication is that Frank can only comprehend the conspiracy when he sheds the shackles of traditional conservative values. By

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<sup>32</sup> Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood* UK: Routledge. 2000. 83.

<sup>33</sup> Sullivan, M. 'The Whistleblower' *Movie Magazine Review* 16<sup>th</sup> August 1987  
< [http://www.shoestring.org/mmi\\_revs/whistle-blower.html](http://www.shoestring.org/mmi_revs/whistle-blower.html)>

<sup>34</sup> Aronoff, M. *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics*. USA: St. Martin's, 1999. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Crowds, G. & Georgakas, D. 'The Audience Should Not Be Just Passive Spectators: An Interview with Francesco Rosi.' *Cinéaste* vol.7, No.1, 1975. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Sullivan, M. 'The Whistleblower' *Movie Magazine Review* 16<sup>th</sup> August 1987  
< [http://www.shoestring.org/mmi\\_revs/whistle-blower.html](http://www.shoestring.org/mmi_revs/whistle-blower.html)>

<sup>37</sup> Hale, J. *The Whistle Blower* UK: Jonathan Cape, 1984. 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

frequently drawing attention to his old-fashioned beliefs, Hale implies that it is only when he abandons these qualities that he will attain cathartic enlightenment.

The casting of Michael Caine as the protagonist is significant because it exploited fundamental elements of his well-established screen persona: Franks Jones is an everyman figure with whom the audience can empathize. However, despite Caine's familiar everyman personality, he also brought qualities to the role of Frank that had not been seen by audiences before. Critics were quick to praise the mild-mannered, self-effacing and quiet aspects of his performance that were befitting a grieving father.<sup>39</sup> These qualities reinforce the sense that Caine's character is a reluctant and unconventional hero. This in turn increases the odds against him and makes his conflict with the state appear more monumental. Caine was playing a more mature paternal figure, and critics noted parallels between Frank and the character of Ed Horman (Jack Lemmon), the father of a disappeared journalist in Costa-Gavras' *Missing*. Both men are right-wing businessmen frustrated by their sons' radical leftist politics. As befits the genre, they both undergo a transformative journey from blissful ignorance to disillusionment with their nation's systems of government.<sup>40</sup> While Ed's journey leads him into conflict with the American Ambassador to Chile, Frank's leads him to a confrontation with senior members of the British Establishment. Like the novels of John le Carré and the other films in the British cycle, *The Whistle Blower* also uses the protagonist's conflict with the state as a means of exploring the class struggle in Britain. Caine has forged a successful career playing archetypal working class heroes who challenge the Establishment and convention, and his role here is no exception.

Just as Caine's character conforms to the generic traits of the ocnophobic protagonist, the antagonist is also typical of the conventions of the conspiracy form. As we have seen consistently, film-makers depict the conspirators as faceless bureaucrats. While the same is true in the novel and film of *The Whistle Blower*, there is also the uniquely British dimension that the principal antagonists come from the country's ruling elite. The

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<sup>39</sup> Ebert, R. 'The Whistleblower' *rogerebert.com* 21<sup>st</sup> August 1987  
< <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-whistle-blower-1987>>

<sup>40</sup> See Couzens, G. 'The Whistle Blower' *The Digital Fix*, 7th September 2004.  
<http://film.thedigitalfix.com/content/id/12717/the-whistle-blower.html#ixzz3PrbUCCAZ>

anonymous conspirators are referred to in the novel as ‘the raincoat men... who wear boots and bowlers.’<sup>41</sup> Hale explains that these characters ‘are not answerable...as far as they are concerned anyone who rocks the boat is a threat.’<sup>42</sup> Typically for the genre, such villains operate outside the realms of conventional jurisdiction and are represented by two characters. In the first place we have Lord (James Fox); the name itself a characternym, resonating with notions of class and privilege: ‘Lord’s education grounded in the classics, removed from the vulgarities of common life...(he) stood for the life of a gentleman. It was this, ultimately, which Bob threatened.’<sup>43</sup> Lord’s primary motivation is to preserve the *status quo* which is threatened by whistle blowers like Bob Jones. Furthermore, the reference to his life ‘as a gentleman’ is reminiscent of the story of the Cambridge Spies, which has proved so influential to the British cycle. As we have seen in Chapters Three and Four, initially the treachery of Burgess, Maclean, Philby and Blunt went unnoticed largely because they were considered ‘one of us’ by an elitist ruling class.<sup>44</sup> James Fox’s role is typical of the aloof and sneering Establishment figures that the actor has made a successful career playing. He would later portray the traitor Anthony Blunt in the 1991 television adaptation of Alan Bennett’s *A Question of Attribution* (BBC, Schlesinger). This fact is noteworthy because the second villain in *The Whistle Blower*, Sir Adrian Chapple (John Gielgud), is a thinly veiled Anthony Blunt clone. The Blunt/Chapple connection is confirmed by the fact that at one point Lord tells a lackey that Chapple will receive immunity from prosecution (precisely the same deal that Blunt struck with the Crown in 1964). Frank Jones is appalled by the fact that Chapple can let innocent people die so that he ‘can continue to have tea with the queen’.<sup>45</sup> Blunt enjoyed exactly this privilege in his role as Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures, and in the media furore surrounding his exposure in 1979 Blunt seemed to epitomise the way in which the British ruling class could enjoy special honours while betraying their country.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hale, J. *The Whistle Blower* UK: Jonathan Cape, 1984. 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>44</sup> Hoffman, T. *Le Carré's Landscape* UK: Queens University Press, 2001. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Wark, W. *Spy Fiction, Spy Films and Real Intelligence* UK: Routledge, 1991. 4. A detailed explanation of the term ‘faction’ is provided in the Introduction.

<sup>46</sup> Aronoff, M. *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics* USA: St. Martin's, 1999. 46.

The antagonists of *The Whistle Blower* are completed by other minor characters, including a ‘government minister’ (played by David Langton) who is intentionally nameless in order to emphasise the shadowy nature of the conspiracy. His anonymity is indicative of the genre’s conspirators who are ultimately unknowable. The antagonist is Hydra-like, with an inexhaustible supply of accomplices waiting to be deployed. When Bob strolls through the cloisters of Gloucester Cathedral, his father who warns him:

Here we have had no Watergate. Here it would always be covered up. Have you ever known a judicial enquiry under one of our impeccable judges to bring in a result contrary to the wishes of the government in power? The Official Secrets Act does the rest.<sup>47</sup>

The fatalistic message in this scene exemplifies what Tim Slessor dubs ‘The Whitehall Loop’: the closed-circuit procedure that protects the government from outside scrutiny.<sup>48</sup> Bob’s comment here refers to the fact that the conspirators of Watergate were brought to justice (despite the obvious damage to the reputation of the government). The dogged work of two journalists in publishing their story, and the subsequent prosecutions of the conspirators, brought resolution to the situation. However, the message that *The Whistle Blower* delivers is bleaker: irrespective of individual agency, the government corruption endures and the secret state prevails.

We will now turn our attention to the ways in which the themes in *The Whistle Blower* are conveyed on a metaphorical level through the use of *mise-en-scene*. Specifically, the film-makers make subtle use of settings to reinforce the messages of conspiracy and about the Establishment. *The Whistle Blower*’s production designer Morley Smith and art director Chris Burke employ the same rationale as their American and European forebears, using setting to reinforce the film’s message about corruption in government and the Establishment. Both men had worked with Julian Bond and Geoffrey Reeve on *The Shooting Party* at a time when the production of heritage films was flourishing in Britain.

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<sup>47</sup> Hale, J. *The Whistle Blower* UK: Jonathan Cape, 1984. 83.

<sup>48</sup> Slessor, T. *Lying in State*. UK: Aurum Press Ltd, 2008. 2. A detailed definition of the Whitehall Loop is provided in Chapter Four.

*The Shooting Party* is set in 1913 and tells the story of the decadent life-style of pre-war English aristocrats. This is juxtaposed with the lives of the subservient, poorer local rural community who serve them. As we have already seen in Chapter Five, the British conspiracy cycle has close links with the heritage films because of the way in which they both make symbolic use of setting to convey messages about Britain's ruling elite. Though very different in narrative terms, both *The Shooting Party* and *The Whistle Blower* use setting and property in an ironic way in order to present the audience with the anachronistic features of an Establishment that is aloof and out of touch with ordinary citizens. The importance of setting used in this way was noted in critic Laurence Alster's review of the *The Whistle Blower*:

Caine learns the truth about his son's death...from civil servants ensconced in oak-panelled opulence low lit in classic film noir style just in case we don't get the point about anachronistic upper class decadence, the scene cuts to an adjoining banqueting hall in which similarly toffish types guzzle noisily.<sup>49</sup>

The establishing shot in this particular sequence lingers on a large stone checkerboard floor, perhaps alluding to the 'great game' that is being played by the security services.<sup>50</sup> It is worth recalling that Nick Mullen crosses the same kind of checkerboard floor in London's Garrick Club in *Defence of the Realm* on his way to meet a security chief. Furthermore, the brief shot of the banquet to which Alster refers is reminiscent of the tribunal sequence in *Defence of the Realm* described in Chapter Five. Both films use *mise-en-scene* to make the audience aware that the conspirators are part of a much larger and deep-rooted community of powerful figures who lurk in the background: unknowable and anonymous, they are indicative of the enigmatic state machine.

The most important metaphorical use of setting is found at the beginning and end of *The Whistle Blower*. Both sequences are set against the backdrop of the Remembrance Day commemorations at London's cenotaph. Just a short walk away is Queen Anne's Gate, where Frank finally confronts the traitor Chapple at his home and at an address that is

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<sup>49</sup> Alster, L. 'The Whistle Blower' *Films and Filming* May 1987: 42-43.

<sup>50</sup> Hitz, F. *The Great Game* Knopf USA: 2004. 3.

rich with espionage history.<sup>51</sup> When Frank arrives on the doorstep, the prominence given to the service medals on his breast pocket is a timely reminder of his credentials as an honourable, dutiful and heroic man who still believes in queen and country. This is juxtaposed with the image of Chapple's own medals, a bitter reminder that, ironically, he has also been rewarded for his services to the nation. At the memorial service itself, there is a medium over-the-shoulder shot of Lord from Frank's perspective: he is dressed in black frock coat and bowler hat, appearing as the quintessential English gentleman. This image of the character appeared prominently on the North American publicity for the film, suggestive of Neumann's belief that in film property 'everything becomes semiotised'; there can be few more iconic accoutrements of the British Establishment than the traditional bowler hat. As we have seen above, this a feature of the character that also described in the novel.<sup>52</sup> The fact that this image was used on American posters reminds us that the film plays down the anti-American sentiment.

In the final shot of *The Whistle Blower*, Frank walks purposefully down Whitehall, passing iconic government buildings synonymous with the power of the state. We are reminded of the way in which Pakula uses the architecture of Washington to dwarf his protagonists; using architectural space as a metaphor for the way in which ordinary characters are overwhelmed by the sense of conspiracy. We see Frank's face in close-up and hear Bob's words echoing: 'It would be conniving of me to do nothing...you see the light of the secret world has put out the light of the real world.' While the death of Sir Adrian brings about some measure of catharsis for the audience, the inclusion of Bob's comment over the action is a clear implication that conspiracy and corruption are endemic in the state and that they have not been defeated. This fatalistic tone in the conclusion is indicative of the British conspiracy cycle. These sequences are entirely absent from Hale's novel and were created by Bond for the film version, as was the character of Sir Adrian Chapple. These facts are perhaps the clearest examples of how the film version shifts the focus of criticism from the American security services to the British Establishment. Langton explained his reason for the inclusion of these scenes, stating that Remembrance Day, the

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<sup>51</sup> See Berkeley, R. *A Spy's London* UK: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 1994. 7-8. Berkeley explains that the same address was for 47 years the official residence of the first chief of MI6 Mansfield Cumming Smith, while dose-by at 54 Broadway is the former home of SIS from 1924-1966 and where Philby conducted much of his espionage.

<sup>52</sup> Neumann, D. *Film Architecture from Metropolis to Blade Runner*. GER: Prestel, 1977. 29.

cenotaph and the laying of wreaths are ‘an iconic moment. When you think about the dead; people who have died for the country...it’s a very, very patriotic moment’.<sup>53</sup> By beginning and ending with such iconic imagery, it means that ideas about sacrifice and patriotism pervade the film.

The theme of sacrifice resonates throughout *The Whistle Blower*. Bob is sacrificed so that the security services can perpetuate the conspiracy; Frank sacrifices his loyal devotion to the state he once served (and like all ocnophobic protagonists, he is irrevocably altered by this sacrifice). Furthermore both novel and film, to varying degrees, explore the sacrifice of British interests to safeguard the special relationship, and in both texts this fact is established early on. For example, at the start of the film, the shot of the cenotaph slowly fades to another of cow parsley gently blowing in a country field. The peace of this moment is swiftly shattered as an SR-71 American Lockheed Blackbird plane hurtles into view overhead. The sequence is an apt visual metaphor that establishes the message of interventionism: American interference has shattered the peace of rural Britain. This moment is typical of the way in which the anti-American sentiment in the film is communicated more subtly than in Hale’s novel.

The film version of *The Whistle Blower* was released in May 1986, by which time media interest in the work of the British intelligence services had intensified. Between July 1984 and February 1985 the case of the Ministry of Defence whistle-blower Clive Ponting made headlines. In March 1984 anti-nuclear campaigner Hilda Murrell was brutally murdered, with the high-profile investigation into her death taking a conspiratorial turn in December 1984 and again in July 1985 when MP Tam Dalyell made allegations linking a relative of Murrell to the Ponting case.<sup>54</sup> This is relevant because Laurence Alster’s review of *The Whistle Blower* comments on how the media’s continuing interest in the Murrell case gave the film’s conspiratorial message added potency.<sup>55</sup> Film scholar Julian Petley went further, believing that the frequency and scale of the scandals that were emerging

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<sup>53</sup> Langton, S. Interview with the author, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2012.

<sup>54</sup> For details of the Murrell case, See; Green, R. *A Thorn in Their Side* UK: John Blake Publishing Ltd. 2013. The website <http://hildamurrell.org/> continues to investigate the killing, and updates the public with any developments in their informal investigations.

<sup>55</sup> Alster, L. ‘The Whistle Blower’ *Films and Filming*, May 1987:42-43

regularly in the press meant that fictional scenarios which once seemed confined to the imaginations of left-wing conspiracy theorists were ‘in danger of becoming old hat’.<sup>56</sup> Petley’s remarks remind us of just how topical *The Whistle Blower* must have been upon its release and the way in which it captured the zeitgeist. His comment also indicates how commonplace conspiracy was generally as a theme at that time. Hal Hinson’s review of the film for the *Washington Post* expresses a similar sentiment. Hinson praises the ‘subdued tension, of hushed, behind-the-hand conversations’ which the critic considers to be ‘as indigenous to British films as Wellingtons and brollies.’<sup>57</sup> Hinson’s use of the word ‘indigenous’ suggests that by the time the film was released audiences were not only familiar with the conspiracy theme, but that they were also familiar with its recurring traits within the British conspiracy genre. Importantly, by identifying the indigeneity of the British qualities in *The Whistle Blower*, Hinson implies that though the British conspiracy cycle owed much to its American or European forebears, by 1986 it had established its own endemic features. By the time *The Whistle Blower* was released in cinemas, the British conspiracy form had gone from being marginal to becoming ubiquitous. Timothy Melley’s research reminds us that this also occurred with the development of the American conspiracy cycle.<sup>58</sup>

The ubiquity of conspiracy as a theme in British popular entertainment reflected its prevalence in the press. We have seen how the public appetite for conspiracy was seized upon in the novel and film versions of *The Whistle Blower* as a means of making both texts more relevant. The Geoffrey Prime case, the trade union ban, the use of the polygraph and the suicides at GCHQ are alluded to in the both book and film. Each text includes two murders of GCHQ employees made to look like suicide; scenes of an American interrogator using the polygraph during an interrogation at GCHQ; and the Ramsay Dodgson sub-plot which draws heavily on the main details of the Geoffrey Prime case. These allusions to real events remind us of the importance of faction in the British conspiracy cycle. For example, in a scene near the beginning of the film, Frank visits

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<sup>56</sup> Petley, J. ‘A Very British Coup’ *Films & Filming*, Spring 1984: 95-97.

<sup>57</sup> Hinson, H. ‘The Whistleblower’ *The Washington Post* 19<sup>th</sup> August 1987.

<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thewhistleblowerpghinson\\_a0c93e.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thewhistleblowerpghinson_a0c93e.htm)

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<sup>58</sup> Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* USA: Cornell University Press, 2000. vii.

Bob's flat where a copy of James Bamford's *The Puzzle Palace* is clearly visible. Later, he peruses a copy of the POEU's *Tapping the Telephone*. Through references like these, the audience is provided with sufficient factual detail to hold a mirror up to contemporary issues. These details are enveloped in a fictional scenario, thereby creating fiction.<sup>59</sup>

By blending elements of reality with fiction, the film-makers try to ensure that messages of state corruption and security excess are more easily absorbed by audiences as fact. Political scientist Thomas J. Price confirms the effectiveness of this approach by noting that 'the inattentive public's mood...is conditioned, not by facts necessarily but by popular stereotypes and images'.<sup>60</sup> Both John Hale's novel and Julian Bond's screenplay exploited popular images of the security services that were fostered by the press. However, Richard Aldrich reminds us that such images in the press were themselves often the result of 'excessive press speculation'.<sup>61</sup> Therefore the unreliability of the evidence on which the novel and the film base themselves undermines the attempts of both texts to make serious political comment. Dover confirms this by warning that the kind of fiction used in *The Whistle Blower* presents a 'distorting view of intelligence activity which leads the viewing public to think that it understands the agencies and what they do'.<sup>62</sup> The discerning viewer would do well to remember that what is presented in *The Whistle Blower* is a distorted, subjective and para-political view of the issues.

Despite the limitations that the inclusion of fiction places on *The Whistle Blower*, the film adaptation successfully presents the audience with a clear message about the immoral expediency of the security services. By developing the human aspect of the father's investigation into his son's death, Frank Jones is used as a conduit to explore the wider political issues: the human dimension becomes the means by which the 'big picture of terrible conspiracies' is explored.<sup>63</sup> However, in doing so, the film-makers personalize the conspiracy and, by making the political personal, they deny the film its ability to offer

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Price, T. 'Popular Perceptions of an Ally: 'The Special Relationship' in the British Spy Novel' *Journal of Popular Culture*, Autumn 94, Vol. 28 Issue 2: 49.

<sup>61</sup> Aldrich, 2011. 322

<sup>62</sup> Dover, Robert. 'From Vauxhall Cross with Love: Intelligence in Popular Culture' *Spinning Intelligence: Why Intelligence Needs the Media, Why the Media Needs Intelligence*. UK: Hurst & Co Ltd. 201.

<sup>63</sup> Reeve, J. Interview with the author, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

constructive criticism about the wider political landscape. In this way the film version is less confrontational than its European forebears. Had Hale been able to realise the film he envisaged, then no doubt the adaptation of *The Whistle Blower* would have been closer in style and tone to the work of the European directors. Costas-Gavras' films consistently present a vociferous case against perceived American imperialism, whereas the producers of *The Whistle Blower* shied from the same fervour in Hale's script. Unwilling to develop Hale's political diatribe for fear of alienating an audience, the producers left *The Whistle Blower* susceptible to the consistent criticism of the form: insightful political comment is subordinated to conventional narrative features which render any political aspect ineffective.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Seven

### Case Study: *The Fourth Protocol*

MacKenzie, 1987

*The Fourth Protocol* was written by Frederick Forsyth and published in August 1984. John MacKenzie's film adaptation followed three years later in March 1987. Of the three case studies in this thesis, *The Fourth Protocol* is closest in style and plot to the wider espionage genre. Nevertheless, its credentials as a conspiracy thriller remain: like *Defence of the Realm*, *The Fourth Protocol* uses the stationing of Pershing and Cruise missiles on British soil as a backdrop to a focus on the expediency of the security forces. The film also follows in the tradition of presenting the British Establishment in a negative light. In contrast to the other case studies, however, *The Fourth Protocol* is the only film in which the protagonist works within the secret state.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores both the novel and the film of *The Fourth Protocol*, beginning with an examination of the context to the novel. This contextual analysis enables us to understand the novel's inception and the way in which it was written as a reflection of Forsyth's view of the British political landscape as he saw it between 1981 and 1983.<sup>2</sup> This first section pays particular attention to Forsyth's political affiliations and the ways in which this affected his treatment of the subject matter. Following these contextual considerations, we will turn our attention to the process of adapting *The Fourth Protocol* for the screen. As is the approach elsewhere in this thesis, the chapter does not concern itself with the 'cul de sac' of fidelity.<sup>3</sup> This study is not interested simply in identifying the ways in which the film differs from the novel, but the reasons behind these differences. As we will see, a significant portion of the author's political message was expunged from the script, going far beyond the usual 'textual transformation' that takes during the

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<sup>1</sup> A similar contrast exists in the Hollywood tradition in which, unlike other films in the cycle, the protagonist in *Three Days of the Condor* is a CIA analyst.

<sup>2</sup> Forsyth, F. Interview with the author, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013. Forsyth explains that some of the original ideas came to him in 1981. It is clear that the events surrounding the GLC election in May 1983 also heavily informed his planning.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, S. 'Materializing adaptation theory: The adaptation industry' *Literature/Film Quarterly* Vol. 36, No.1, 2008: 4.

process of adaptation.<sup>4</sup> This part of the chapter will explain the reasons for the divergence by revealing the film-makers' conflicting ideologies that impacted negatively on the film. The discussion of the adaptation process is followed by an exploration of the ways in which the *The Fourth Protocol* makes use of the conspiracy form. As with the other case study chapters, we will focus specifically on the ways in which character and setting are employed as a means of presenting the theme of conspiracy. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the film's critical reception at the time of its release, as well as an evaluation of it thirty years later based on the views of the film-makers themselves.

The plot of *The Fourth Protocol* centres on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that was signed in 1968. Part of this treaty forbids the non-conventional delivery of nuclear weapons. The protagonist is MI5 agent John Preston (Michael Caine), an employee of F-Branch dealing with surveillance of extremist organisations and subversion. Preston discovers that a Whitehall official named George Berenson (Anton Rodgers) has been stealing top secret documents and supplying them to a South African contact. Unbeknownst to Berenson, the contact has been passing the documents to Moscow. Preston reports Berenson to a senior MI6 official, Sir Nigel Irvine (Ian Richardson). Meanwhile, Preston's unconventional methods bring him into conflict with his immediate superior, the acting Director of MI5, Brian Harcourt-Smith (Julian Glover), who reassigns Preston to C-Branch, monitoring Britain's airports and ports.

Meanwhile in Russia, KGB agent Valerie Petrofsky (Pierce Brosnan) is despatched on a secret mission to Great Britain by the ambitious head of the KGB, General Govershin. One of Govershin's rivals, Borisov (Ned Beatty), reveals to a General Karpov (Ray McAnally) that Govershin is conducting a covert operation abroad. Karpov discovers that Govershin's scheme, entitled Plan Aurora, is to send Petrofsky to the Britain in order to assemble and detonate an atomic device, thereby contravening the fourth protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The explosion is intended to appear like an accident at an East Anglian US Air Force Base called Baywaters. Govershin's aim is that the catastrophic 'accident' will bolster support for the anti-nuclear movement in Britain

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<sup>4</sup> Gunning, T. quoted in *True to the Spirit*. McCabe, C., Warner, R., Murray, K. (Eds) UK: Oxford University Press, 2011. 43.

and impel the British electorate towards an anti-nuclear – Labour – government. Govershin's ultimate goal is the installation of a Labour government of the hard left which could be heavily influenced by the Kremlin.

Petrofsky is installed in Britain and receives nine constituent components required to build the atomic bomb. Each component is smuggled onto the mainland in a variety of innocuous guises by different couriers. One of the components, a disc of radioactive polonium, comes to the attention of John Preston who finds it amongst the personal possessions of one of Petrofsky's couriers. Preston's research reveals that the item can only be used as part of an atomic device. He eventually tracks down a Czech agent named Winkler (Jiri Stanislav), who unwittingly leads him to Petrofsky's rented home adjacent to the Baywaters air base. Preston quickly assembles an assault team who raid Petrofsky's property before he can detonate the device. Petrofsky is shot by the leader of the assault team who is under orders from Sir Nigel Irvine to assassinate Petrofsky. In the film's closing scene, Preston finds Irvine secretly meeting with Karpov, his KGB counterpart. Preston surmises that he and his team were deliberately led to Petrofsky so that they could stop him. Preston realises that he has been manipulated by both Irvine and Karpov who intend to exploit a peaceful resolution, depose Goverhsin and secure their respective positions. Preston realises that he has little hope of ever exposing their treachery and departs. The film ends with a fleeting moment of suspense when it is suggested that Preston's young son has been kidnapped; the threat is dispelled when his son reappears, but there remains a lingering suggestion that Preston is under threat because of his knowledge of the conspiracy.

*The Fourth Protocol* was Frederick Forsyth's eighth novel. By the time it was written, Forsyth was an established international best-selling author of espionage fiction. His debut novel, *The Day of the Jackal*, was published in 1970 and was an immediate global success. Three of Forsyth's books were adapted into successful films: *The Day of the Jackal* (Zinnemann, 1973), *The Odessa File* (Neame, 1974) and *The Dogs of War* (Irvin, 1980). As we have seen in Chapter Four, Margaret Thatcher was apparently 'besotted' by Forsyth's

work.<sup>5</sup> Documentarian Gavin Collinson credits Forsyth with helping to ‘define and develop public understanding of espionage’. Collinson attributes this to Forsyth’s journalistic training as a correspondent for the Reuters News Agency, which the author brought to bear in writing ‘immaculately researched’ novels.<sup>6</sup> Forsyth himself has acknowledged the extent to which his work relies on journalism to create fiction, considering himself ‘much more a journalist ... investigative reporting is what lies behind these novels’.<sup>7</sup> Like John le Carré, Forsyth’s sustained global popularity suggests that he has maintained a significant influence over the public’s perception of the work of Britain’s intelligence services through his populist fiction. Also like le Carré, Forsyth’s work for MI6, under the cover of his journalistic responsibilities, imbues his writing with an additional level of verisimilitude.<sup>8</sup>

The original plot of *The Fourth Protocol* resulted from a combination of questions that Frederick Forsyth asked between 1981 and 1983. The first question was ‘Could the British public be persuaded to elect a left-wing government in a state of outrage over something the Americans had apparently done?’ The second question asked: ‘Could the Prime Minister then be toppled ... [to bring in an] overtly pro-Soviet British Prime Minister?’<sup>9</sup> The author recalls that in 1983 ‘Michael Foot was probably the furthest left of any Labour leader certainly in my lifetime ... entryism looked as if it was going to become the dominant coin within the Labour Party in other words, the Labour Party had to swerve very far to the left.’ Forsyth used this assessment as the starting point for the plot. Specifically, Forsyth pondered the extent to which a general election could be manipulated by deceiving the electorate. Forsyth considered whether the public could be ‘duped’ into electing Michael Foot following ‘an outrage so appalling that it could be blamed on the forces of the right’.<sup>10</sup> In the novel, question one would metamorphose into Plan Aurora: the devastating effects of a nuclear ‘accident’ designed to impel the electorate towards electing a government committed to nuclear disarmament. Forsyth

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<sup>5</sup> Milne, S. *The Enemy Within* UK: Verso, 2004. 303.

<sup>6</sup> Collinson, G. *An Interview with Frederick Forsyth* The Picture Company Production, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> See Flood, A. ‘Frederick Forsyth: I was an MI6 agent.’ *The Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/01/frederick-forsyth-i-was-an-mi6-agent> and Forsyth, F. *The Outsider: My Life in Intrigue*. UK: Bantam Press, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Collinson, G. *An Interview with Frederick Forsyth* The Picture Company Production, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

believed that events such as those described in Chapter Four resulted in a public ‘pot-pourri of latent hostility to NATO, latent hostility to the USA, latent hostility to the Thatcher government’.<sup>11</sup> This feeling of latent hostility reinforced Forsyth’s belief that, under the right circumstances, the British public could be sufficiently swayed towards a Labour government favouring unilateral disarmament.

Forsyth’s second question was whether a prime minister could be toppled in office, with a pro-Soviet leader taking power. The author was convinced that there was evidence that this kind of subversion had already taken place, and that the precedent had been set in May 1981 during the election of the Greater London Council (GLC).<sup>12</sup> Andrew McIntosh was elected as Chairman of the GLC on May 6<sup>th</sup> 1981 but was ousted from office within twenty-four hours in a coup staged by ‘Red Ken’ Livingstone, which was reported by the media as a move towards ‘red-blooded Socialism for London’.<sup>13</sup> Based on these events Forsyth concluded that what had occurred at the GLC ‘could be done at national level’.<sup>14</sup> Forsyth’s views of the Labour Party were gleaned from consultations with a number of moderate Labour politicians who were ‘tearing up their party cards’ because they were ‘horrified’ by the way in which the Labour Party was moving further to the left.<sup>15</sup> Based on this research, Forsyth became convinced that the premise of the novel was feasible: a pro-Soviet Labour government could be elected in the wake of a sufficiently dramatic nuclear event and ‘thereafter, a moderate Labour prime minister could indeed be ousted by a more extreme leader’.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to scrutinise the context to Forsyth’s research, because doing so provides us with a clearer understanding of his treatment of the theme of conspiracy in the novel. Firstly, we should remember that the information above reflects the author’s perspective and should not be assumed as an objective assessment of contemporary events.

Significantly, Forsyth is a long standing member of the Conservative Party.<sup>17</sup> He is a

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<sup>11</sup> Forsyth, F. Interview with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Forsyth, F. Letter to the author, February 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Carvel, J. *Citizen Ken* UK: Chatto & Windus, 1984. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Forsyth, F. Letter to the author, February 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Forsyth, F. Interview with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, L. ‘Right Said Fred’ *The Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2001.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/mar/19/crime>>

regular political commentator on television and radio, and in 2003 was the recipient of the One of Us Award for his services to Conservatism.<sup>18</sup> Although such details may seem extraneous, they are important because a strong right-wing political thread runs through at least the first quarter of the narrative in the novel of *The Fourth Protocol*. For example, Forsyth devotes approximately twenty pages to a fictitious letter sent from Soviet spy Kim Philby to the head of the KGB. In it, the Philby character provides a comprehensive appraisal of the Labour Party and the British political scene in the early 1980s. The Philby letter is a perfect example of the author's use of faction: it provides subjective details about contemporary British politics which are evaluated by 'Philby' himself. However, in a somewhat confusing use of faction, Forsyth presents the reader with right-wing views which are filtered through the lens of Philby, a traitor to Britain and a devoted communist. The 'Philby' letter presents a strong case about the susceptibility of the Labour Party to Soviet infiltration. This fictional letter panders to the real-life fears of subversion which preoccupied members of the right.

This is one example of the way in which Forsyth's research was employed to make the boundary of fact and fiction more nebulous. Furthermore, it is important to note that Forsyth claims to have had access to 'Your Eyes Only' information from sources within government agencies, including the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, when planning *The Fourth Protocol*.<sup>19</sup> (If this is accurate, then perhaps Forsyth gained such access as a result of his reputation, his political connections within the Conservative Party or his contacts within the intelligence community.) Forsyth's reputation is based on his meticulous research. The idea that this information is gleaned from his former colleagues in the intelligence community adds an air of authenticity and respectability to the writing, but also makes the sense of faction more profound and assigns credibility to what remains a fictional narrative.

With his questions answered and the theories tested to his satisfaction, Forsyth wrote the novel. Published in August 1984, *The Fourth Protocol* became a best-seller and in 1985

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<sup>18</sup> London Spy 'Forsyth shows the way forward' *The Telegraph*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2003.  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4267417/London-Spy.html>>

<sup>19</sup> Forsyth, F. Interview with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

Forsyth began work on adapting it into a screenplay. The next part of this chapter considers that process.

Despite having no experience of writing for the screen, Forsyth was keen to adapt the novel himself. In an interview with film journalist Terence Doyle during the production, Forsyth explained that for the adaptation it was necessary to reduce the novel's labyrinthine plot to 'its simplest form: a story about two men and a bomb'.<sup>20</sup> Here we see the emergence of a feature of the adaptation process that would ultimately blight the final product: the complex political dimensions in the novel were removed to create a more cinema-friendly product. This is typical of film-makers' consistent approach to the conspiracy genre in which 'you don't catch flies' with vinegar.<sup>21</sup> When the script was completed, Forsyth contacted Michael Caine who immediately showed interest in playing the part of John Preston. Both men agreed to become executive producers on the film so that they could raise the necessary finances. Since neither Forsyth nor Caine had any prior experience of film production, Timothy Burrill was hired to take control as producer on the film.<sup>22</sup>

At Caine's suggestion, the producers approached John MacKenzie to direct and this was to have significant repercussions for the film adaptation. MacKenzie had enjoyed critical and commercial success with the thriller *The Long Good Friday* in 1981. He had also worked with Caine on an adaptation of Grahame Greene's *The Honorary Consul* (1983). Reflecting on the decision to hire MacKenzie, Forsyth explains 'I do remember an interview where he was moderation itself...It was only later did it become plain that he was very, very left-wing indeed'.<sup>23</sup> MacKenzie was deeply critical of Forsyth's script, and persuaded producer Burrill to let the director rewrite it himself.<sup>24</sup> Burrill acknowledges that Forsyth's screenplay was unsuitable.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Forsyth continued to re-draft

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<sup>20</sup> Doyle, T. 'Pages as Pictures: On forthcoming screen adaptations' *Films & Filming*, No. 387, December 1986: 18-20.

<sup>21</sup> Hennebelle, G. 'Z Movies or What Hath Costa-Gavras Wrought?' *Cineaste* Vol.6, No.2, 1974: 28-31. Greek director Constantin Costa-Gavras told *Cineaste* that 'You don't catch flies with vinegar'. See Chapter Two.

<sup>22</sup> Bilbow, M. 'Production Report: The Fourth Protocol' *Screen International* No.566, September 1986. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Forsyth, F. Interview with the author, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop, D. 'The Fourth Protocol' *Vicious Imagery*, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2007.

< <http://viciousimagery.blogspot.com/2007/01/films-of-michael-caine-51-fourth.html> >

<sup>25</sup> Burrill, T. Interview with the author, 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2014. Burrill has revealed that John Frankenheimer was approached to direct, and he immediately began developing Forsyth's script with screenwriter George Axelrod. This

his own work but MacKenzie rejected a number of subsequent screenplays and eventually brought in screenwriter Richard Burrige to develop Forsyth's work. By the time that the final script was produced, MacKenzie had 'vetoed all criticism of the KGB' that was present in Forsyth's novel and his screenplay.<sup>26</sup> The library of London's British Film Institute contains a copy of the seventh draft of the screenplay. There are substantial differences between this screenplay and the final film, suggesting that there were at least eight versions of the screenplay.

According to Forsyth, MacKenzie's vision was a betrayal of the basic premise of the novel because it 'excised the Muscovite plotting, which was the whole point.'<sup>27</sup> On the matter of script development, Burrige considered Forsyth's script 'unwieldy' and 'problematic' largely because of technical aspects from the novel that Burrige deemed to be uncinematic.<sup>28</sup> For example, Forsyth's screenplay included details about Whitehall procedures and copious amounts of exposition about technical particulars that were superfluous to a modern, plot-driven cinematic thriller. It is interesting that such details were considered superfluous because many of the aspects which Burrige and MacKenzie removed are examples of faction: not only a fundamental component of the British conspiracy thriller, but a feature synonymous with Forsyth's literary style. Some faction remains in the screen version, including the procedure for building a nuclear device, though most were removed. The aspects that MacKenzie considered extraneous were erased to give the film an increased pace and tension that was American in flavour.<sup>29</sup> It is worth remembering film academic Garcia-Mainar's observation that during the 1980s the spy genre moved significantly towards 'an increasing relevance of action and suspense'.<sup>30</sup> MacKenzie was influenced by this development in the thriller genre and this

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provides a noteworthy link to the Hollywood conspiracy thrillers explored in Chapter One. Frankenheimer and Axelrod had collaborated as director and screenwriter respectively on the *The Manchurian Candidate* in 1962, an American conspiracy thriller considered a classic of the genre. Frankenheimer regularly returned to the conspiracy genre with thrillers including *Seven Days in May* (1964), *Black Sunday* (1977) and *The Holcroft Covenant* (1985). The latter reunited the director with Axelrod, and starred Michael Caine in the lead role. It is likely that this is the reason why Caine approached Frankenheimer and Axelrod with *The Fourth Protocol*. However, the involvement of Frankenheimer and Axelrod soon ended following disagreements with Burrill over the estimated budget. Despite this, Axelrod retains a credit for the film's screenplay, together with Richard Burrige.

<sup>26</sup> Forsyth, F. Interview with the author, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013

<sup>27</sup> Forsyth, F. Letter to the author, February 2012

<sup>28</sup> Burrige, R. Interview with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Garcia-Mainar, L. 'The Return of the Realist Spy Film' *Cineaction*, No.88, 2012: 12-19

is the direction that he intended the film to take in order to provide audience appeal. Ironically, however, in an on-location interview during filming MacKenzie lamented the loss of storytelling in favour of ‘too much in visual pyrotechnics.’<sup>31</sup> This is precisely what MacKenzie’s vision of *The Fourth Protocol* exploits at the expense of Forsyth’s storytelling. What is certain is that the film version is at times in conflict with itself, never sure whether to be a fast-paced action thriller or a slower-paced cerebral procedural investigation.

Irrespective of the differences between the novel and the film versions of *The Fourth Protocol*, they both contain the essential features that are indicative of the conspiracy thriller form. We will now focus on the ways in which characterisation and setting to communicate the theme of conspiracy. As with the other case studies within the cycle, the novel and film versions of *The Fourth Protocol* explore Man’s relationship with the secret state. In a marked difference to the ocnophobic protagonist usually at the centre of the conspiracy thriller, John Preston is by no means the ‘hater of thrills’ that we see in other conspiracy films.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly true when we compare John Preston with the vulnerable grieving father that Caine plays in *The Whistle Blower*. Preston is an MI5 operative and an expert in his field. In the novel, Forsyth includes considerable exposition about Preston’s career in intelligence. As we have seen in Chapter Four, F Branch was a real department within MI5 dealing ‘with surveillance of extremist political organizations... he [Preston] had been in F1 heading up (D) section concerned with the penetration of extreme left-wing elements into Britain’s Labour Party’, the novel explains.<sup>33</sup> (It is interesting to note that in March 1985 - less than a year after the publication of Forsyth’s novel - MI5 officer Cathy Massiter ‘blew the whistle’ on this department because of concerns about its methods of surveillance and its unaccountability.)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bilbow, M. ‘Production Report: The Fourth Protocol’ *Screen International*/No.566, September 1986: 25.

<sup>32</sup> Neale, S. *Genre and Hollywood* UK: Routledge, 2000. 83.

<sup>33</sup> Forsyth, F. *The Fourth Protocol* UK: Hutchinson, 1984. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Massiter, C. *20/20 Vision: MI5 Official Secrets* Channel 4, March 1985.  
< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuAzSDhZXk>>

Cawelti and Rosenberg's work on the development of the spy story concludes that the hero's attitude is one of 'superiority, loneliness and resentment'.<sup>35</sup> This is applicable to the character of Preston. Although he is a hero who comes from within the system, Preston is deceived and manipulated by his superiors and he is left threatened and powerless at the end. He is lonely because his insubordination ostracises him from his bosses who effectively relegate him to C-Branch. Later, the knowledge Preston attains about corruption within the intelligence services also isolates him because he is left powerless to do anything about it. Ironically, though, at times Preston's loneliness is also his strength because his survival as a spy relies on his detachment from those around him. Cawelti and Rosenberg also identify the protagonists' feeling of resentment: in the case of Preston, he is resentful of the way in which his investigations are hindered and then dismissed by Harcourt-Smith and, later, Irvine. This resentment results in Preston challenging the authority of his superiors, which results in further isolation. Finally, as Cawelti and Rosenberg also suggest here, Preston possesses a sense of superiority: he doggedly continues his investigation, undaunted by threats and demotion. Preston is a man of conviction, a good man in a corrupt bureaucratic state. It is this strength of purpose that makes him appealing to the audience and which ennoble him in contrast with his seniors.

We know that Forsyth approached Michael Caine directly for the role of John Preston. For his portrayal of Preston, Caine drew on his characterisation of the eponymous spy in the 1960s film adaptations of Len Deighton's Harry Palmer novels.<sup>36</sup> Caine discussed both characters in an interview, observing that 'Harry Palmer was the Woody Allen of spies and John Preston is the Clint Eastwood of spies.'<sup>37</sup> Although Preston and Palmer are significantly different as characters, it is interesting to note that Caine compares the two by referencing actors who play them rather than the roles themselves. Perhaps this is because Woody Allen and Clint Eastwood are inextricably linked to recurring film personas of marginalized characters. Allen's neurotic Jewish New Yorker bears no

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<sup>35</sup> Cawelti, J. & Rosenberg, B. *The Spy Story* USA: University of Chicago. 1987. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Caine played Harry Palmer in three film adaptations of Len Deighton novels: *The IPCRESS File* (Furie, 1965), *Funeral in Berlin* (Hamilton, 1966) and *Billion Dollar Brain* (Russell, 1967). He reprised the role in two made-for-television original screenplays: *Bullet to Beijing* (Mihalka, 1995) and *Midnight in St Petersburg* (Jackson, 1995)

See <[http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0021349/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_ch\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0021349/?ref_=fn_al_ch_1)>

<sup>37</sup> *Filming the Novel: The Fourth Protocol* Fourth Protocol Productions, 1987

resemblance to Eastwood's Dirty Harry or the man with no name of Sergio Leone's spaghetti western trilogy. However, these recurring characters share some similar traits: both are cynical and both are disenfranchised and both are rebellious. John Preston is alienated in much the same way: as a spy not only is he required to deceive those closest to him, but he also deceives his conspiratorial superiors who try to manipulate him. Screenwriter Richard Burrige also made reference to the Clint Eastwood connection. Burrige considered *The Fourth Protocol* to be 'my *Dirty Harry*' because, like Dirty Harry, John Preston is 'an outcast...a renegade, maverick character who was being bounced around by his superiors'.<sup>38</sup> The presence of Caine in the lead role also imbues Preston with an empathetic everyman dimension that is absent from the book.

In contrast, the antagonists of *The Fourth Protocol* represent a corrupt and archaic British Establishment. This reminds us of the way in which the British conspiracy cycle uses the form to address issues of class conflict.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, the antagonists are represented by senior secret service personnel, Harcourt-Smith and Sir Nigel Irvine: the double-barrelled name and the knighthood emphasise the contrast with Preston. One scene is indicative of Caine's familiar anti-Establishment persona being exploited for deliberate effect. When reprimanded for insubordination, Harcourt-Smith reminds Preston that 'I *am* Chief of the Service', to which Caine - deliberately emphasising his Cockney idiolect - fires back 'Acting Chief, sunshine. An' if you ask me, you're acting like a complete arsehole.' Preston's use of the vernacular is a crowd-pleasing moment which underscores the contrast between protagonist and antagonist. The cast is populated with British character actors who are synonymous with Establishment characters. Harcourt-Smith is played by Julian Glover: saurian, sneering and superior. Glover's role here is comparable to the villains he has played in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* (Glen, 1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Spielberg, 1991). Conspirator Sir Nigel Irvine is played by Ian Richardson, whose career-defining role was arguably that of the Machiavellian politician Francis Urquhart in the *House of Cards* trilogy (BBC, 1990-1995). In a scene reminiscent of the confrontation with Harcourt-Smith, Preston's contempt for Irvine manifests itself by

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<sup>38</sup> Burrige, R. Interview with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2014

<sup>39</sup> Ebert, R. 'The Whistleblower' *rogerebert.com* 21<sup>st</sup> August 1987  
< <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-whistle-blower-1987>>

another reassertion of his anti-Establishment qualities: 'You don't give a shit about anything except your lousy career'. Though this scene plays differently in Forsyth's original novel, it shares the same tone, with Preston scornfully referring to the elitist 'magic circle, the solidarity of the Establishment.'<sup>40</sup> These scenes remind us of Snyder's conclusion that these films are anti-Establishment, and *The Fourth Protocol* suggests that if the Establishment is corrupt then its redemption must come from outside.<sup>41</sup> Although Preston is an MI5 man he remains, as Burrige states, a renegade. John Preston represents the marginalized everyman who alleviates the audience's sense of 'agency panic' and who facilitates their sense of catharsis.<sup>42</sup>

Allan Cameron's production design and Peter Howitt's set decoration make use of settings to reinforce these messages about the corrupt Establishment. Sequences filmed on location in London are used to emphasise the wealth and privilege of the world that the conspirators and traitors inhabit. This includes a sequence in which the traitor Berenson is followed by Preston's team of 'watchers'. Berenson leaves his flat in Mayfair to meet his contact, passing through Hyde Park Corner and High St Kensington *en route*. Elsewhere in the film we see Berenson's substantial country home. The novel tells us that Berenson 'spent most evenings...in his club'.<sup>43</sup> Such locations become semioticised, employed as a means of suggesting to the viewer that power and privilege are synonymous with treachery and corruption.<sup>44</sup> Three particular scenes demonstrate Preston's antagonistic relationship with his superiors and all take place within the cosseted world of Whitehall. These scenes reinforce both the general Establishment milieu as well as Caine's incongruity with it. The first of these, in which Preston is debriefed by his superiors, is characteristic of all three such scenes. We see Preston enter the room in an over-the-shoulder shot behind four men. Filmed in mid-shot, their backs are to us emphasising the faceless bureaucracy. Caine enters in the distance, centre screen, flanked by the Establishment figures and therefore metaphorically trapped, showing his weakness in relation to their status. When we finally see the officials face-on,

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<sup>40</sup> Forsyth, F. *The Fourth Protocol* UK: Arrow, 2011. 433-434.

<sup>41</sup> Snyder, J.R. 'The Spy Story as Modern Tragedy' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol.5, No.3, Summer 1977. 216-234.

<sup>42</sup> Melley, T. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* USA: Cornell University Press, 2000. 47. For an explanation of agency panic in the American conspiracy tradition, see Chapter One, page 4.

<sup>43</sup> Forsyth, F. *The Fourth Protocol* UK: Arrow, 2011. 110.

<sup>44</sup> Neumann, D *Film Architecture from Metropolis to Blade Runner* GER: Prestel, 1977. 29.

one of them is sporting the distinctive coloured tie of London's elite Garrick Club. When Harcourt-Smith speaks he is filmed in low angle, once again emphasising his superiority to Preston. Furthermore, director of photography Phil Meheux films the space so that the audience are encouraged to linger on the traditional Georgian features: the high ceilings and oak panelling which emphasise a sense of tradition, but also staidness and lack of modernity. This is enhanced by Howitt's attention to detail with the props: his inclusion of the famous Pietro Annigoni painting of Elizabeth II on one wall, a painting of the Duke of Edinburgh on another. When Preston is seated, we can clearly see over his shoulder a vast map of the world. It is as though Howitt's dressing is reminding the audience of the former British Empire and its moribund attitudes that the Establishment characters represent.

*The Fourth Protocol* premiered in London in March 1987. It is interesting that, like *The Whistle Blower*, the film version of *The Fourth Protocol* was received more favourably in the United States than in Britain. A number of American reviewers found that it succeeded in navigating a balance between character and action. Roger Ebert for example considered the film 'first rate' because 'it pays attention to its characters and shows how their actions grow out of their personalities...it's a thriller but ...it simply is a very absorbing drama.'<sup>45</sup> Desson Howe found the film to be 'streamlined and rich at the same time - like the best of the James Bond films, but serious.'<sup>46</sup> According to the American critics at least, *The Fourth Protocol* was very much in the tradition of the subtle, densely plotted and faction-based American conspiracy cycle. Howe's review also notes that *The Fourth Protocol* capitalises on the popularity of the Bond franchise and similar high-concept thrillers in its use of action set-pieces and a fast-paced narrative. As we have seen, these are the qualities that MacKenzie favoured over of Forsyth's use of faction.

Critic Rita Kempley's review is valuable in helping us to assess the film adaptation in relation to the conspiracy cycle generally. Firstly, Kempley makes a reference to the debt that the film owes to John le Carré. She acknowledges the way in which *The Fourth Protocol*

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<sup>45</sup> Ebert, R. 'The Whistleblower' *rogerebert.com* 21<sup>st</sup> August 1987  
< <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-whistle-blower-1987>>

<sup>46</sup> Howe, D. 'The Fourth Protocol' *The Washington Post*, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1987  
<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thefourthprotocolhowe\\_a0b0e4.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thefourthprotocolhowe_a0b0e4.htm)>

attempts to employ realism and offers a fatalistic, cynical treatment of the genre: 'Like one of Smiley's people, Preston is a man of honour caught in a bureaucratic power play'.<sup>47</sup> As we have already seen, the hero of the British conspiracy thriller is as much under threat from his nefarious superiors as he is from the shadowy figures on the other side of the Cold War divide; Preston is no exception. The British cycle consistently presents the intelligence services as indistinguishable from their Soviet counterparts in terms of amoral expediency. However, Kempley concludes that the film is 'less cerebral than *le Carré*, which allows for action pacing'. These remarks offer a clear example of the ways in which the conflicts over the nature of the film impacted adversely on the adaptation. Does the film of *The Fourth Protocol* offer an exploration of the British political landscape, or is it a conventional race against time thriller? The answer is that it is both, but as Kempley's review suggests, this is incongruous and these two different objectives end up battling for supremacy on screen.

Evidence of the film's internal conflict is perhaps best exemplified by the conclusion to *The Fourth Protocol*. The film ends with John Preston realising that his MI5 superior has conspired with his Russian counterpart. Preston confronts both men with their treachery, and then leaves to meet his young son who is in a waiting car. Preston approaches the car only to discover that the boy is not where he left him. This creates a fleeting moment of tension in which the audience are encouraged to think that the son has been kidnapped by the security services in order to buy Preston's silence. MacKenzie infers that Preston will 'never sleep peacefully again' as a result of what his investigation has revealed to him.<sup>48</sup> However, as soon as the kidnapping is suggested, we cut to a shot of Preston's son playing nearby; the boy runs to embrace his father and all is well. Finally, the moment turns into a freeze-frame and Lalo Schiffrin's triumphal, anthemic score bursts into life. The inference that Preston's life, and that of his family, is under threat is typical of the sinister conclusions we find throughout the conspiracy cycle: the hero irrevocably changed by his experience and under threat from the state. However, this aspect is never

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<sup>47</sup> Kempley, R. 'The Fourth Protocol' *The Washington Post*, 29<sup>th</sup> August 1987  
<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thefourthprotocolkempley\\_a0ca5d.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thefourthprotocolkempley_a0ca5d.htm)>

<sup>48</sup> *The Fourth Protocol Special Edition DVD* Special Features: Audio Commentary. UK: ITV Studios Home Entertainment, May, 2007.

fully realised and *The Fourth Protocol* opts for a conventional ending which intrudes on the sense of lingering disquiet that is initially suggested. This is indicative of the divergence between Forsyth's source material and MacKenzie's film that occasionally hinders the final product.

Rita Kempley also posits the intriguing suggestion that 'there is an uneasy feeling that the whole thing could have been better made into an excellent miniseries, explaining all of the book's nuances, rather than a solid, well-made film'.<sup>49</sup> This is a significant point. As we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, during the early to mid-1980s, television had established a tradition of highly successful adaptations of espionage thrillers. The mini-series format was successful for the conspiracy genre because the characterisation, realistic attention to spy tradecraft and the subtle building of suspense were methodically established over five or six hours of screen time. If *The Fourth Protocol* had been adapted into a mini-series, it may well have been more successful in developing some of the issues that are so prominent in the novel. A tantalising example of how a mini-series might have looked can be found in seventh draft of the screenplay of *The Fourth Protocol*. In it, Forsyth's draft is much longer and more reliant on dialogue than the final version that reached cinemas.<sup>50</sup> Scenes are more in keeping with the novel, and are in similar vein to the le Carré style: cerebral, and verbose. However, as we have seen, the film version 'cut the rabbit', as Michael Caine put it, in order to increase pace.<sup>51</sup>

In many ways, the film of *The Fourth Protocol* has become more interesting in the intervening years than it was upon its initial release. Reflecting on the film almost thirty years later, the film-makers have provided interesting evaluations about it. Richard Burrige opines that:

I can see how much better it would have been, had we really tightened it up. How much darker we could have made it...it could have been much more existential. The whole idea

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Forsyth, F. *The Fourth Protocol* Screenplay: Seventh Draft, April 1986. Available: *British Film Institute* Book Library Cat. No.512896.

<sup>51</sup> Doyle, T. *Pages as Pictures: On forthcoming screen adaptations* Films & Filming No. 387, December 1986: 18-20.

of to what extent somebody is acting on orders...where those levers are in his head, and where they are in an external society and how somebody could operate.<sup>52</sup>

The existential approach reminds us of what is achieved in the best of the conspiracy thrillers: an examination of Man's relationship with the bureaucratic state and the journey of formation of lonely heroes like Preston, who struggle with the moral paradox of how to defend the indefensible in the name of security. With the benefit of hindsight, Burrige confirms that he and MacKenzie were more concerned with 'the mechanics of the story', but their reliance on such mechanics renders the political comment largely redundant.<sup>53</sup> However, this fact did not doom the project to failure because it contented the tastes of American critics at least and did moderate business at the box office.

Producer Timothy Burrill reflected in 2014 that a significant weakness with the film in 1987 was its timing. By the time *The Fourth Protocol* was released, the political climate had changed considerably and nuclear Armageddon seemed much less likely than it had done when Frederick Forsyth was writing in 1983.<sup>54</sup> By 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev had replaced the ailing Konstantin Chernenko as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Aged 54, Gorbachev was almost twenty years his predecessor's junior and was a reformer. In March 1985, Margaret Thatcher spoke warmly of the new Russian premier and famously declared that 'we can do business together'.<sup>55</sup> Over the ensuing months there was a thawing of long-held Cold War conflicts. Gorbachev's policies of *Glasnost* (openness) and *Perestroika* (restructuring) were introduced in February 1986 and epitomised the change in direction of Soviet policy. Burrill believes that 'If we made the film five years earlier it would have had more impact on the current political situation'.<sup>56</sup> Although mainstream thrillers are rarely used as a means of gaining political insight, the stories that these thrillers tell do need to be relevant in order to stimulate an audience. Even the family-friendly fantasies of the Bond franchise reflected global events. *Octopussy*

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<sup>52</sup> Burrige, R. Interview with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Recent assessments identify the military operations *Abel Archer* (NATO) and *Operation RYAN* (USSR) in 1983 as bringing the world the closest it had been to nuclear conflict since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1961. See Andrew, C. & Mitrokhin, V. *The Mitrokhin Archive* UK: Penguin, 2000. 565.

<sup>55</sup> Gorbachev, M. 'The Margaret Thatcher I knew' *The Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> April, 2013.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/mikhail-gorbachev-margaret-thatcher-death>>

<sup>56</sup> Burrill, T. Interview with the author, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2014.

(Glen) dealt with a plot strikingly comparable to that of *The Fourth Protocol*, about a rogue Soviet general detonating an atomic bomb on an American air base in Britain and making it look like an accident. However, that film was released in 1983, thereby making it more relevant to the issues of the day. The question of timing is perhaps the most significant factor in explaining why *The Fourth Protocol* was not more commercially successful. With its central premise appearing out of step with political developments, the film was unlikely to make a significant impact.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to reflect on what my research has revealed in relation to the objectives of the thesis. Firstly, one intention has been to establish the extent to which the Hollywood, European and British conspiracy cycles share stylistic features, an area hitherto overlooked by scholars. It has become clear that there is a central message common to all three cycles: the democratic process has been undermined by government and its security forces in order to assert political will. The research reveals that, despite the hybridization of the genre that took place between the emergence of the American conspiracy thrillers of the early 1960s and the British films of the mid-1980s, there are consistencies in the way in which the Hollywood, European and British cycles use characterisation and setting to explore the theme of conspiracy. The first part of this conclusion will briefly re-examine the commonalities in these areas, and consider what these shared common stylistic features can teach us about the British strain of the genre.

Despite such commonalities, we have seen consistently that there is variation in the way that the three cycles have approached the conspiracy theme. As one would expect, these variations can be partially attributed to the different temporal and geographical contexts of the films. The second part of the conclusion will summarise the ways in which the films reflect their political context and will, more importantly, reflect on the extent to which the British case studies provide an accurate reflection of the British public's concerns about the conduct of the government and the intelligence services regarding matters of defence and security. This research has consistently heeded John Belton's warning that films should not be viewed simplistically as mirrors of reality. However, it is important to reflect on the British conspiracy cycle's degree of cultural verisimilitude, and Belton acknowledges that there is benefit in using films to understand the 'cultural conditions' of the societies from which they emerged.<sup>1</sup>

The final part of this chapter considers criticism of the conspiracy thriller genre, chiefly that meaningful political comment is subordinated to crowd-pleasing thrills. We will

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<sup>1</sup> Belton, J. *American Cinema/ American Culture* US: McGraw Hill. 1994. xxi

collectively re-evaluate the genre's ability to balance political insight with engaging narrative, paying particular attention to how far this was achieved by the British case studies. During the course of this conclusion, consideration will also be given to the limitations of the research, thus highlighting areas for future scholarly research.

The collective approach to the conspiracy thriller genre reveals that the protagonist in these films has had many faces over time: a Hollywood matinee idol in the form of Warren Beatty and Robert Redford in the American cycle; an ageing, world-weary cynic, demonstrated by Yves Montand and Lino Ventura in the European films and a working class everyman played by Michael Caine and Gabriel Byrne in the British thrillers. Despite these different faces, the protagonist remains an empathetic everyman, defined by a sense of superiority and loneliness.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist gains moral superiority over the conspirators and frequently foils the conspiracy, but this superiority is undermined by the inference in some films that the conspiracy will reappear. Other films in the genre show that the sense of superiority is diminished by the death of the protagonist. This is the case in *The Parallax View*, *Illustrious Corpses* and *State of Siege*, as well as *Defence of the Realm*. In other examples, the protagonist gains a Pyrrhic victory because his exposure of the conspiracy comes with the threat of his imminent demise, as is the case in *Three Days of the Condor* as well as *The Whistle Blower* and *The Fourth Protocol* from the British cycle. The protagonist is also defined by loneliness and isolation. In *The Parallax View*, *Illustrious Corpses* and *Defence of the Realm* he becomes isolated when drawn into the labyrinthine plot of the conspirators, who ultimately manipulate him so that he becomes their unwitting patsy. In *Three Days of the Condor*, *The Fourth Protocol* and *Illustrious Corpses* his loneliness is prompted by his determination and conviction, which isolate him from his colleagues and peers. *The Whistle Blower* and *Missing* offer a variation on this kind of isolation, with the protagonist's wilful sense of purpose alienating him from family and loved ones.

A holistic approach to the Hollywood, European and British cycles has also revealed the ways in which *mise-en-scene* is semiotised in the conspiracy genre.<sup>3</sup> Alan J Pakula's use of iconic, classical government buildings in Washington in *All the President's Men*, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Cawelti, J. & Rosenberg, B. *The Spy Story USA*: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Neumann, D *Film Architecture from Metropolis to Blade Runner* GER: Prestel. 1977. 29.

his use of expansive modern structures through wide angle cinematography in *The Parallax View*, reinforces the isolation of the lonely protagonist pitted against the leviathan state. We have seen the extent to which this influenced the British conspiracy films, particularly in *Defence of the Realm*. Pakula's recurring use of Americana such as the Fourth of July parade, the totem pole and the red, white and blue property used in the rally sequence foreground the film's message about the 'America we've lost'.<sup>4</sup> *Mise-en-scene* is used in the same way in the European cycle, and Costa-Gavras' portrayal of the American Embassy in *State of Siege* is as austere and impenetrable as Pakula's depiction of the Parallax Corporation headquarters. Equally severe is Francesco Rosi's recurring motif of the panopticon in *Illustrious Corpses*, which is a frequent reminder of the methods of state surveillance and control.<sup>5</sup> Rosi contrasts the ultra-modern, sterile environment of the surveillance headquarters with the ancient catacombs which are intended to symbolise the archaic and moribund judicial system. The semioticised use of *mise-en-scene* in the conspiracy thrillers provides a metaphorical representation of the antagonist. The conspirators themselves are furtive and frequently unfathomable, so in the absence of specific, identifiable human conspirators, buildings become the metaphorical antagonist. Large, imposing structures are employed to convey the permanence, inaccessibility and immutability of the secret state. Furthermore, Costa-Gavras' *Z* and Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses* take place in unnamed locations, and this approach influenced *Defence of the Realm*, in which the London locations 'assumed an authoritative presence and therefore became a symbol of every seat of authority not just a British one'.<sup>6</sup> These film-makers deliberately suggest that state corruption is endemic, and not restricted to a particular time or place.

By the time that the British case studies were emerging, a mine of generic stylistic devices had been established and was at the disposal of the film-makers. However, though the films sought to emulate certain stylistic aspects of their American and European counterparts, they were not derivative. The British case studies use *mise-en-scene* symbolically to criticize the aloof, unyielding and archaic nature of the British

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, J. Alan J Pakula: *His Films and His Life* USA: Back Stage Books. 2005. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, M. 'Revealing the Hidden City: The cinematic conspiracy thriller of the 1970s' *The Italianist* No. 1, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Drury, D Interview with the author 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2012

Establishment. The Establishment conspirators inhabit the private members' clubs of London in *Defence of the Realm*, while in *The Whistle Blower* their machinations are conducted in stately homes. In *The Fourth Protocol*, MI5 itself is housed within Georgian offices, whose walls bear the signifiers of the British Empire, and the film ends with senior secret service officials scheming within the cloisters of the King of Siam's Garden at Eton. Perhaps the most prominent settings used consistently throughout the British cycle are the Houses of Parliament and Whitehall. It is significant that the conspiracy thrillers have, overwhelmingly, made use of real-life, urban locations, because this reinforces the sense of verisimilitude, adding plausibility to the suggestion that real-world governments and the intelligence services are all-pervasive and more powerful than the individual.

What do these shared stylistic features of character and setting reveal to us about the British conspiracy case studies? Timothy Melley concludes that the protagonist's isolation is intended to resonate with the audience's own sense of powerlessness against the government and corporate forces which control our lives. While Melley's work is part of a long tradition of scholarly research into conspiracy in American culture, there is no British equivalent, and since this thesis has focussed on three British case studies, it is impossible to state with any certainty that the British conspiracy thrillers reflect the 'lonely crowd' mentality or 'agency panic' referred to by Melley (see Chapter One).

However, it does seem clear that the British case studies present a fatalistic message about the conspiratorial nature of the secret state and its power to overwhelm individual agency. However, unlike their American forebears, the case studies explore class antagonism in Britain through their depiction of a working class protagonist pitted against the Establishment. Writers such as Friedman, Hill and Dave remind us that the case studies emerged at a time when British film-makers were responding to Thatcherism with more socially inclusive films.<sup>7</sup> We have also seen in earlier chapters that the British

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<sup>7</sup> The extent to which 1980s British cinema explored issues representing marginalised and minority communities, and dealt with issues of class can be found in;

Hill, J. *British Cinema in the 1980s* UK: Clarendon Press, 1999. 29

Friedman, L. (Ed.) *Fires Were Started: British Cinema & Thatcherism* UK: UCL Press, 1993. 17

Dave, P. *Visions of England* USA: Berg, 2006. 13

heritage film emerged at the same time as the conspiracy thrillers (indeed the producer and screenwriter team of 1985's *The Shooting Party* also made *The Whistle Blower*), and that they explored the esoteric and privileged world of the aristocracy and the upper middle class. Chapter Three highlights the strong theme of Establishment corruption that runs through le Carré's novels, and which proved so influential on the British conspiracy cycle, while the case study chapters themselves reveal a consistency in the films' use of stylistic devices to present the Establishment in a negative light. The semiotised use of Establishment settings means that real-life structures associated with government are filmed in a way that reinforces the impenetrable world of the Establishment and its ability to manipulate and control the individual. In addition, the recurring presentation of a lonely, working class David in conflict with the Establishment Goliath reflects a depiction that was found elsewhere in British film during the 1980s that suggested the Establishment was immutable and antiquated. The discussion of the British films as representations of class concerns is deliberately limited throughout this research in order to focus on the Cold War politics within the films. However, it is clear that there is the potential for more work to be done on the extent to which the British conspiracy cycle addresses the class system in the 1980s.

Though the Hollywood, European and British conspiracy cycles share stylistic features, hybridization of the genre has inevitably taken place. This has occurred not only because of the creative and financial factors that impacted on the production of each film, but also as a result of the diverse political contexts to which the films were responding. The work undertaken by American scholars suggests that national crises provide the conditions in which the conspiracy form flourishes. In the Hollywood cycle, such crises included political assassinations, the ill-fated Vietnam War and a malaise brought about by rapidly developing new social systems. The American conspiracy films of the 1970s responded to a feeling that 'society that was brainwashed... manipulated and controlled' by the government and its security forces,<sup>8</sup> following revelations about the FBI's COINTEL programme and the CIA's Operation Chaos. However, as Costa-Gavras opined, 'this type of thing doesn't only happen elsewhere, it happens everywhere,'<sup>9</sup> and

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<sup>8</sup> Pratley, G. *The Films of John Frankenheimer* USA: Lehigh University Press, 1998. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Crowds, G. 'Z' *Cineaste* Vol. 27, No. 4, Autumn 2002. 53.

we have seen clear evidence of how European film-makers used many of the same stylistic techniques as their American counterparts to respond to different political crises during the 1960s and 1970s. Francesco Rosi's depiction of state-sponsored assassinations in *Illustrious Corpses* would prove a prescient representation of the so-called strategy of tension during Italy's Years of Lead.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the conspiracy films of Costa-Gavras, made between 1968 and 1982, suggested that conspiracy was pandemic, with *Z, State of Siege* and *Missing* vociferously condemning perceived government malpractice in Greece, Uruguay and Chile, respectively. Specifically, *Z, State of Siege* and *Missing* used the conspiracy form to denounce American imperialism and interference in the politics of sovereign nations.

The Hollywood, European and British conspiracy cycles can be defined as 'negative thrillers',<sup>11</sup> while Ryan and Kellner refer to films of this kind as 'crisis films'.<sup>12</sup> However this is, perhaps, too strident a term for the British conspiracy thrillers which are perhaps better considered as films of concern rather than crisis. Produced between 1984 and 1987, the British case studies reflected concerns over the reawakening of hostility between East and West during the period known as the Second Cold War. We know that during that time the prime minister and senior members of the security services 'wanted to go further in the struggle against...global communism',<sup>13</sup> and Aldrich and Cormac's recent assessment of the period reminds us that a full counter-subversion programme was established in order to achieve this.<sup>14</sup> One of the objectives of this thesis has been to establish the extent to which the British films' messages of government conspiracy were justified. The British case studies responded to media reports which suggested that disproportionate methods of state surveillance were being adopted as a means of combatting subversion. As early as 1980, an edition of the *New Statesman* revealed details of the police's surveillance squad, known as Tinkerbelle,<sup>15</sup> while a report by the Post Office Engineering Union from July of the same year provides stark evidence of

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<sup>10</sup> Vulliamy, E. 'Appreciation: Francesco Rosi 1922-2015' *The Guardian* 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2015.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/18/francesco-rosi-appreciation-italian-film-maker>>

<sup>11</sup> Palmer, J. *Thrillers* UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan, M. & Kellner, D. *Camera Politica* Indiana University Press. USA:1988. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Aldrich, R. & Cormac, J. *The Black Door* UK: Collins, 2016. 355

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, D. 'Big Buzby is Watching You' *New Statesman* February 1980, 158-160.

concerns from union members about the legality and legitimacy of surveillance operations they were being asked to undertake.<sup>16</sup> Details of security practices provided by whistle blowers Sarah Tisdall, Cathy Massiter, Clive Ponting, Jock Kane and Peter Wright were all the more damaging to the government because of their apparent frequency within a five year period between 1982 and 1987, which served to give the impression that conspiracy was rife; the prime minister also an unprecedented ten leaks enquiries were ordered between 1980 and 1985.<sup>17</sup>

Robert Dover believes that fictional portrayals of the intelligence services are problematic because they deliver audiences a ‘fragmentary and distorting view of intelligence activity’. While none of the British case studies claimed to depict reality, the case study chapters and the research into the style of John le Carré demonstrate how the use of fiction in conspiracy texts can potentially result in the public believing that ‘it understands the agencies and what they do’.<sup>18</sup> Despite the negative portrayal of the security services in the conspiracy films, the response of the intelligence community to subversion was, to some extent, justified. Recently de-classified intelligence documents reveal that Soviet infiltration was taking place in Britain during the 1980s. For all the films’ suggestion of excessive security measures, it is worth noting that Christopher Andrew’s access to declassified MI5 files reveals that the end of the 1970s saw a peak in ‘hostile intelligence personnel’ in Britain,<sup>19</sup> while Anthony Glees’ work in the archives of the former East Germany shows that between 1980 and 1988 there were between 200-250 ‘hostiles’ from the Soviet Union and other nations spying on the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky’s research shows that the Soviet leadership also considered recruitment of foreign nationals to be the ‘keystone of operational measures’ during the 1980s.<sup>21</sup> As these examples show, a more complex reappraisal of state security during the 1980s is required, and we must not accept the whistle blower cases, media coverage, or indeed the conspiracy thrillers themselves as evidence of endemic

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<sup>16</sup> *Tapping the Telephone* Post Office Engineering Union, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1980

<sup>17</sup> Dorrill, S. *The Silent Conspiracy* UK: Heinemann, 1994. 18

<sup>18</sup> Dover, Robert. ‘From Vauxhall Cross with Love: Intelligence in Popular Culture.’ *Spinning Intelligence: Why Intelligence Needs the Media, Why the Media Needs Intelligence*. UK: Hurst & Co Ltd. 201.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew, C. *Defence of the Realm* UK: Penguin, 2010. 573

<sup>20</sup> Glees, A. *The Stasi Files* UK: Free Press, 1993. 17

<sup>21</sup> Andrew, C. & Gordievsky, O. *Instructions from the Centre* UK: Sceptre, 1991. 40

malpractice in the intelligence services at that time. The de-classification of government and security files means that there is still much work to be done to definitively establish the extent and nature of the threat from hostile foreign intelligence services. Historians can then more accurately reassess the response by the British intelligence services and establish how justified state surveillance was during that time.

A significant American military presence looms large in the British case studies and this reflects the debate surrounding nuclear armaments which was prompted by the stationing of nuclear missiles in Britain. *The Fourth Protocol* presents a plot to detonate a nuclear device on a USAF Base in East Anglia, which is intended to expedite a policy of unilateral disarmament. *Defence of the Realm* involves an accident at an American airbase (alluded to as the Lakenheath USAF Base) and has the American authorities conspiring with their British counterparts to cover up the incident. *The Whistle Blower* has the British and American security services conspiring in the murder of GCHQ employees. Historians Sked and Cook consider the nuclear arms debate to be the ‘main concern’ of this period,<sup>22</sup> and research reveals that there is an element of verisimilitude can be found in the case study films: the CND discovered that an accident involving a B-52 aircraft at the Lakenheath airbase, like that described in *Defence of the Realm*, did take place and was concealed.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, novelist Frederick Forsyth’s research at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston for *The Fourth Protocol* confirmed that the nature of the atomic device, as well as its method of transport and means of assembly that are described in the book and film, were entirely plausible (see Chapter Five). Less plausible perhaps is *The Whistle Blower’s* premise of assassination of GCHQ personnel by the security services, though the plot reflects conspiracy theories which abounded following the deaths of deaths of twenty-five scientists and communications operatives between 1982 and 1990, some of whom had worked on the American Strategic Defence Initiative, known as ‘Star Wars’.<sup>24</sup> Aside from the limited verisimilitude, there is evidence to show

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<sup>22</sup> Sked, A. & Cook, C. *Post-War Britain: 1945-1992*. UK: Penguin, 1993. 418.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Broken Arrow Cover Up in the UK.’ *Centre for Public Environmental Oversight*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1996  
<<http://www.cpeo.org/lists/military/1996/msg00205.html>>

<sup>24</sup> For details of the conspiracy theories surrounding the deaths, See Bloom, C. *Thatcher’s Secret War* UK: The History Press, 2016. 164-166  
Collins, T. *Open Verdict* UK: Sphere Books. 1991.  
20/20 ‘Grave Secrets’ ABC News, May 5, 1989.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDA3gGBzMKA>>

that the negative portrayal of the so-called special relationship did, to some extent, reflect public opinion at the time. Not only was there a sharp rise in the membership of CND between 1979 and 1984 as well as regular high-profile anti-nuclear rallies, more significantly statistics published in the *Sunday Times* in 1983 indicate that the overwhelming majority of the British public who were interviewed were against the stationing of Cruise missiles in Britain and did not view the special relationship with America as being of benefit to the United Kingdom.

More widely, public opinion polls taken when the British conspiracy thrillers were in production, between 1984 and 1987, reveal that the satisfaction ratings for the government were at their lowest for the entire decade. There was also a negative public perception of the prime minister herself, who was variously seen as ‘out of touch’, ‘inflexible’ and ‘narrow-minded’ (see Chapter Four). This is reflected in the films with depictions of government characters as callous, privileged and self-serving bureaucrats. However, while there is clear indication that the British conspiracy thrillers reflected common anxieties about matters of defence and security, there is no evidence to suggest that the majority of the British public believed that the government was conspiring with the security services and involved in unethical practices, as the British conspiracy thrillers suggest. What we do know is that during the time that the British case studies were in production there was a significant increase in the publication of intelligence histories, so that ‘by 1986 the shelves of bookshops were groaning under the weight of spy books’.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps also apposite that despite public awareness of the security services, MI5 and MI6 were not formally acknowledged until 1989 and 1986, respectively.<sup>26</sup> What this suggests is that there was a perfect storm that provided the context for the development of the British strain of the conspiracy thriller genre to emerge over a short period: a significant number of prominent security scandals emerged between 1982 and 1987; there was an increased awareness of the issues surrounding nuclear armaments which brought into question Britain’s relationship with America; there was a burgeoning range of intelligence histories that fuelled public interest in state security. These contributory

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<sup>25</sup> Gill, P. *Policing Politics: Security, Intelligence and the Liberal Democratic State* UK: Cass, 2004. 9

<sup>26</sup> Jones, L. ‘The time when spy agencies didn’t officially exist’ BBC News 8<sup>th</sup> November 2014  
< <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29938135> >

factors resulted in British film-makers using the conspiracy form to exploit an increased public interest in intelligence, and embellish widely-held concerns about defence and security matters. Though the British case studies do not offer an accurate portrayal of the practice of government or the intelligence community, they do, to a limited degree, accurately reflect public concerns about defence and security issues.

The film historian John Hill acknowledges that the conspiracy genre successfully raises a number of questions about modern politics and engages mainstream audiences who are not normally interested in political debate.<sup>27</sup> However, Hill believes that the form is limited in the conclusions that it can provide. More damningly, Michael Albert believes that the genre offers little more than ‘the sport’s fan’s or voyeur’s view of complex circumstances’.<sup>28</sup> Both writers believe that conspiracy thrillers subordinate political complexity to thrills.<sup>29</sup> Film scholar Michael Selig believes that this is because conspiracy narratives are reduced to a simplistic battle of good and evil, in which audience empathy supersedes political engagement.<sup>30</sup>

The question then becomes: how can the conspiracy thriller genre balance pertinent political comment with an engaging plot within the confines of mainstream cinema? For director Costa-Gavras, the answer is that, ‘you don’t catch flies with vinegar’,<sup>31</sup> and he believes that it is possible to navigate a course between ‘sugar coating the pill’ while delivering effective political comment to audiences.<sup>32</sup> Conspiracy films which achieve this equilibrium are, however, few and far between. *Three Days of the Condor* was a critical and commercial success which balanced tension with light-touch contemporary concerns about the international oil crisis and fears over CIA and FBI surveillance. The acclaim lauded upon Alan Pakula’s *All the President’s Men* also provides an example of how an audience can be engaged in a labyrinthine, meticulous and protracted plot. Guy Hennebelle’s aptly titled *Z Movies, or What Hath Costa-Gavras Wrought?* reminds us of the slew of sub-standard conspiracy thrillers that tried to emulate the accomplishments of

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<sup>27</sup> Hill, J. 1999, 148-150

<sup>28</sup> Albert, M. ‘Conspiracy? ...NOT!’ *Z Magazine* January 1992, 17-19.

<sup>29</sup> Hill, J. 1999, 148-150

<sup>30</sup> Selig, M. ‘Conflict and Contradiction in the Mass Media’ *Jump Cut*, no. 30, March 1985: 19-21

<sup>31</sup> Hennebelle, G. ‘Z movies or What hath Costa-Gavras wrought?’ *Cinéaste* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1974: 28-31.

<sup>32</sup> Monaco, J. ‘The Costa-Gavras Syndrome’ *Cinéaste*, Volume 7 Issue 2 Spring 1976: 18-21.

Costa-Gavras' ground-breaking film. We have also seen throughout this thesis that the messages of some films were significant enough to cause political controversy and wider debate. Chapter Two shows that Costa-Gavras' *Missing* was withdrawn from American cinemas because a lawsuit was brought against the film-maker by the former US Ambassador to Chile. Francesco Rosi's *Illustrious Corpses* was denounced in 1976 by a Roman court for the way in which it depicted a government institution. Chapter One reminds us that President Kennedy supported John Frankenheimer's *Seven Days in May*, believing it to be an important film that could make audiences aware of the dangers of nuclear arms.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, the British case studies appear to conform to Hill's appraisal. Though the British case studies raise issues about contemporary security matters while delivering engaging narratives, despite this, they frequently suffer from their attempts to mimic the style and tone of le Carré, and fall victim to the fact that, as Sutherland noted, 'nebulosity works in le Carré's novels but it poses problems for film'.<sup>34</sup> The necessary subtle creation of tension, intricate character development and the protracted weaving of complex and politically engaging narratives is almost impossible within the confines of a two-hour mainstream film. The most critically and commercially successful le Carré's adaptations have been in the form of television mini-series, a format which can foster the development of these crucial factors over several hours. Another weakness of the British case studies is that the British Establishment is depicted as the antagonist, and this is problematic because we are never quite clear who the Establishment comprises; it becomes a reductive, all-purpose catharsis. This approach limits the effectiveness of any intended political message because no blame is apportioned to a specific person or group. The research conducted into the production context of the British case studies also reveals the way in which political insight was compromised in favour commercial interests. The producers of *Defence of the Realm* insisted that the director filmed an alternative, more conventional ending; the producers of *The Whistle Blower* clashed with its writer over the novel's fervent anti-American stance, resulting in author John Hale refusing to attend the film's premiere; the final edit of *The Fourth Protocol* eradicated all

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<sup>33</sup> Clarke, T. 'Kennedy and What Might Have Been: JFK's Last Hundred Days' *New York Times*, August 12, 2013). 95

<sup>34</sup> Sutherland, J. 'To Catch a Spy' *Sight & Sound*, October 2011. 16.

trace of the Muscovite plotting or the discussion of entryism that was fundamental to Frederick Forsyth's source material. These examples remind us that 'the only really effective censorship still exists and it is stronger than ever: that is economic censorship'.<sup>35</sup> The British conspiracy thrillers are clear examples of the conflict in mainstream cinema between creative freedom, meaningful insight and financial necessity.

The conspiracy thriller genre continues to hybridize, providing further work for scholars to undertake. The development of the genre remains driven by Hollywood, and the theme of political assassination which proved popular in the 1960s and 1970s has lost none of its relevance, with *The Manchurian Candidate* being remade for the Gulf War generation by Jonathan Demme in 2004. Sydney Pollack dealt with the same theme when he returned to the conspiracy genre with *The Interpreter* (2005), while *Shooter* (Fuqua, 2007), *Vantage Point* (Travis, 2008) and *The International* (Twyker, 2009) also deal with political assassinations. During the 1990s there was a rise in the number of corporate conspiracy films, such as *A Civil Action* (Zaillian, 1998), *The Insider* (Mann, 1999), *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005) and *Michael Clayton* (Gilroy, 2007). One of the most lucrative conspiracy sub-genres of recent times might be dubbed the historical conspiracy thriller, and includes adaptations of the best-selling novels of American author Dan Brown as well as the *National Treasure* films (various, 2004 – 2007).<sup>36</sup> Europe remains a continuing source of conspiracy thrillers that have international appeal. Costa-Gavras has continued to work within the genre, directing *Amen* (2002) and *Le Capital* (2012), while *Spiral* (various 2005-2014) and *Spin* (2012-2016) are examples of foreign language conspiracy mini-series that have been successful internationally. The most successful European conspiracy film of recent times has been the Oscar winning *The Lives of Others* (von Donnersmark, 2006).

In comparison with the Hollywood cycle, the tradition of British conspiracy texts remains neglected by scholars. During the course of my research, it has been difficult to determine exactly why this should be, but it remains an area worthy of greater attention, despite the fact that some British conspiracy texts have been included in wider

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Smith, A. *French Cinema in the 1970s* UK: Manchester University Press, 2005. 62

<sup>36</sup> The three collaborations between director Ron Howard and actor Tom Hanks are: *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Angels and Demons* (2009) and *Inferno* (2016).

explorations of the espionage genre. There continues to be a plentiful supply of British conspiracy productions, and this is currently led by renewed interest in film and on television for adaptations of John le Carré's novels. Elsewhere, British former journalist Paul Greengrass, who co-authored Peter Wright's *Spy Catcher*, has become one of the foremost proponents of the modern conspiracy thriller through the Jason Bourne films, as well as *Bloody Sunday* (2002) and *Green Zone* (2010). On television, the BBC's *Spooks* (various, 2002-2011) ran for almost a decade, with a cinema adaptation released in 2014. It is noteworthy that *Spooks* depicts the British Establishment in much the same way as the British case studies here, which suggests that the class antagonism which underpins the British conspiracy cycle of the 1980s is no less appealing for audiences. It is also interesting that a number of conspiracy productions from the 1980s have been updated for modern audiences, including *Edge of Darkness* which was adapted for the cinema in 2010, once again under the direction of Martin Campbell. Channel Four's *A Very British Coup* (Jackson, 1988) became *The Secret State* (Fraiman) in 2012. A remake of *Defence of the Realm* is currently in development, with the original producer Lynda Myles attached to the project. These updates and remakes suggest that the public's interest in conspiracy has not diminished; the WikiLeaks revelations, the media phone-hacking enquiry and the disclosures of whistle blowers like Edward Snowden sustain our thirst for conspiracy. In 1969, the *Sunday Times* asked John le Carré about the complexity of his writing. He replied, 'I despise the short answer in the perfectly made world'.<sup>37</sup> The continuance of political machinations means that our real-world imperfections will surely provide filmmakers with ample fodder for conspiracy in the years to come.

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<sup>37</sup> McKay, A. 'The Nine Secrets of John le Carré.' *BBC Arts*, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2016.  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/artides/2tCpsCBmNqYY2PYs4PsBb/the-nine-secrets-of-john-le-carre>>

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