compendium heroicum

Spies

BY BARBARA KORTE
VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED AUGUST 11, 2023

Table of content

1. Spies
2. Historical outline of spy fiction and its medialisations
3. References
4. Selected literature
Citation

This entry is derived from Korte, Barbara: Geheime Helden. Spione in der Populärkultur des 21. Jahrhunderts. Göttingen 2017: Wallstein.

1. Spies

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a spy is a person who "watches a person or persons secretly" and whose "business it is to keep a person, place, etc., under close observation; esp. one employed by a government in order to obtain information relating to the military or naval affairs of other countries, or to collect intelligence of any kind."[1] This definition does not point to a heroic profile, but a seminal work on 20th-century espionage literature describes the spy as "one of our favorite mythical heroes".[2] Indeed, it is through fictional portrayals – in literature, film and television, comics and computer games – that the secret actions of spies become public at all and can then (potentially) be heroized. Even today most fictional spy heroes are male, but heroic female agents are gaining in importance and popularity. However, fictional spies are usually precarious and ambiguous heroes because their deeds, insofar as heroic qualities can be attributed to them at all, are performed in moral grey areas. This makes the spy character suitable for a critical and sceptical negotiation of heroism. The audiences of spy fiction are thrillingly entertained, but they are also called upon to scrutinise both the heroicity (or non-heroicity) of the secret agent, and the socio-political order that produces such agents and deems them necessary.

As Eva Horn notes, "modern states […] depend on espionage, secret operations, surveillance, and the classification of information, which are indispensable governmental and military tools. Modern power fundamentally hinges on secrets and secrecy."[3] The dubious heroicity of secret agents is a seismograph for analysis of the present: it reacts to risks to the security of state and society, and to the anxiety such risks arouse in the public. This applies to the Cold War period as well as to the 21st century, where the public is threatened by terror but also exposed to the surveillance with which the secret services counter terrorism.

Their clandestine actions make the actors of espionage narratives seem suspect, and this lends a

special quality to negotiations of the heroic in this genre. Even when spies display heroic qualities – demonstrating courage and cunning, saving people or their country – they still operate in secret and are often perpetrators in a negative sense.[4] This is true even for the iconic James Bond, who embodies spy heroism like no other figure in popular culture. For all his heroic qualities – willingness to take risks and sacrificing himself, or proving himself in battle with grandiose villains – Bond is undeniably, as his creator Ian Fleming let him pronounce, a killer: “It’s not difficult to get a Double O number if you’re prepared to kill people … It’s nothing to be particularly proud of.”[5] The deeds of a secret agent, even where they serve the greater good, are morally tainted and excluded from everyday normality. It is the dilemma of the spy that for the good of his society he must act against its values and laws. Like his enemies, the secret agent on the ‘right’ side tortures, kills and is a professional liar. Paradoxically, he is sanctioned to do so, and Lars Ole Sauerberg therefore compares the secret agent and his troubled relationship to law and order to the publicly appointed but stigmatised executioner: both do ‘dirty work’ so that society can maintain its harmony.[6] The obligation, and the willingness, of the spy to act covertly and dubiously emphasises the hero’s characteristic isolation from the community of the ordinary. While ‘classic’ heroes shine, are celebrated, admired or even revered, spies are denied fame and public honour. The deeds of real spies only become known when secrecy barriers have been lifted or when a betrayal has resulted in a public scandal, and it is a topos in spy fiction that the public does not know what the secret hero does for them. Not infrequently, the fictional spy is even sacrificed, betrayed and dropped by his own service. As a victim, the spy can trigger empathy and sympathy, but the proximity of his deeds to those of his opponents, his deceptions and his moral transgressions arouse suspicion. The spy is always latently suspected of becoming a traitor; the figure has a special tipping moment that destabilises notions of ‘radiant’ heroism and at the same time questions the conditions that make the spy’s tainted heroism necessary.

2. Historical outline of spy fiction and its medialisations

The history of spy fiction unfolds in different medial forms, parallel to the emergence of the modern intelligence services.[7] According to most accounts, it was first consolidated in English literature around 1900 within a context of concern for the security and integrity of the nation in the face of the weakening of Britain’s imperial supremacy and the concurrent strengthening of the German Empire.[8] William Tufnell Le Queux’s novel *Spies of the Kaiser* (1909) fuelled the sense of a secret threat to such an extent that a spy panic broke out; this response to the novel became one of the factors that led to the establishment of a central Secret Service Bureau, from which the British domestic and foreign intelligence services (MI5/Security Service and MI6/Secret Intelligence Service) later developed. In the first phase of British espionage literature, the enemy spy was still contrasted with an unmistakably heroic agent of one’s own side. In Erskine Childers’ *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), Englishmen posing as sailors off the German North Sea coast uncover invasion plans by the German military. John Buchan’s espionage novels (classics of the genre to this day) also have an unambiguous heroic profile. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), the protagonist Richard Hannay is a patriotic and athletic hero with high moral standards who finds fulfilment in adventure for the good of Britain. In this early heroic tradition of spy literature[9], the protagonists are not yet precarious and ambiguous; they act out of conviction for the values and order of their society and, significantly, do so without being constrained by the bureaucracy of a modern administrative apparatus. Elements of the heroic spy narrative continued into the 1950s in Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels; however, here Bond repeatedly takes offence at the bureaucracy of MI6 and believes that post-war British society no longer appreciates his heroism, even though it desperately needs it during the Cold War.[10] It has often been criticised that Fleming’s novels increasingly became romance-like, and the Bond films took this element to extremes, at least until the 1990s. But here, too, there was a connection to the *zeitgeist* and to contemporary anxieties: the heroic was offered as a phantasm with

which post-World War II feelings of insecurity and national inferiority could be compensated in a similar way as with the heroic agent figures around 1900.

A distinctly anti-romantic line of the spy narrative emerged after the First World War, and this was due to a number of factors: a widespread disillusionment regarding (wartime) heroism as well as the pessimistic mood of the 1930s, which was fostered by the Great Depression and the strengthening of totalitarian regimes. This context gave rise to spy characters whose actions are not adventurous but unspectacular and prosaic; they seem deheroized or even anti-heroic because they do not act autonomously but determined by the structures of their secret service. The short stories in Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden, or the British Agent* (1928) paint an unglamorous picture of secret agents and activities, and they do this in a realistic mode. To John le Carré, Maugham's stories were the first to narrate espionage in a mood of disenchantment.[11] During the 1930s, this disenchantment was taken up in the early spy novels of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene and continued to shape their later works in the genre. The new formula of espionage fiction emphasises the spy's character and how caught up he was in domestic politics and affairs within the intelligence services – an intricate landscape where striving for power, the activities of networks and dubious moral standards threaten society's security as much as the enemies behind the Iron Curtain.[12] The best-known examples of disenchanted spy fiction in the Cold War era are John le Carré's novels, which also reflect how the British secret service was shaken by several scandals involving defectors and moles and came under increasing criticism. In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1962), the protagonist, Eric Leamas, is aware that there is no difference between opponents and their methods in the Cold War. He experiences the infamy of the secret services first-hand when he and his lover are made pawns in an attempt to prevent an MI6 mole in the East-German service (a former Nazi of all people), from being exposed. Leamas openly addresses the sordidness of his profession: "What do you think spies are: priests, saints and martyrs? They're a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives."[13]

In the 21st century, the espionage narrative is experiencing a new boom, especially in film and television. American examples are the Jason Bourne films (since 2002) or the TV series *24* (2001–2010) and *Homeland* (2011–2020), which are not only about the threat of global terror, but also about the shady operations of the secret services and their actors. In this context, the Cold War gains new relevance because here, in contrast to today's terrorism, enemy countries were still clearly identified. This can be seen, for example, in the success of the feature film *Bridge of Spies* (2015) or the international appeal of the German television production *Deutschland 83* (2015). 21st-century whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden have revealed that danger to national security comes not only from hostile attacks but also from the operations of one's own secret services because they are increasingly monitoring public life.[14] This situation has had an impact on the heroization and deheroization of the actors in the intelligence and security services. While they are increasingly perceived as institutions that violate democratic rights, whistleblowers, who betray secrets, are considered, at least by parts of the public, as heroes of democracy, as seen, for example, in Oliver Stone's biopic *Snowden* (2016). Distrust of the secret services and a shift in heroization towards figures who are not professional spies is also evident in the widely acclaimed British miniseries *The Night Manager* (2016), which transposes a Le Carré novel from the 1990s into the context of the Middle East after 2011. Here, it is not the members of the secret services who act heroically (instead supporting corrupt policies), but characters who are drawn into operations and then commit themselves to the right goals out of moral conviction. A ruthless arms dealer, the "worst man in the world", can only be fought because a disillusioned ex-soldier and the female head of a law-enforcing agency courageously stands up for law and justice – though not without using the dirty means of their antagonists themselves: lies, deception and even murder. The need for individuals to act with integrity against machinations in politics and the intelligence services even characterises the series of Bond films with actor Daniel Craig from *Casino Royale* (2006) to *Spectre* (2015). Here, the ageing Bond

character is staged with an emphatically retrospective and even nostalgic gesture and thus used to criticise new intelligence measures, especially preventive surveillance practices. As a heroic old-time spy, Bond not only addresses the audience's need for security, but is used to lead a discourse on the modern surveillance state and its risks for democracy and individual rights. Apart from their constant adaptation to current political and social conditions, James Bond narratives also illustrate the transmedia presence of spy fiction, for they exist not only in the form of novels and films, but also as comics and computer games, which are, however dominated by American spy characters.

Even the espionage narrative with its affinity to post-heroic sentiment thus reveals that the 21st century is still fascinated with the heroic and continues to negotiate social concerns through heroic figures and their deeds. Scepticism and irony about heroism continue to be articulated, but alongside this there is evidence of an affirmation of heroic action, provided it is used to defend fundamental community values. However, such heroizations have limits, and possibilities for re-enchanting the heroic have a patina to them – at least in a genre as closely tied to current political and social conditions as the spy narrative is.

3. References

1 "spy, n.". In: Oxford English Dictionary. July 2023: Oxford University Press, DOI: 10.1093/OED/9722186595 (accessed on 09.08.2023).
2 Cawelti, John G. / Rosenberg, Bruce A.: The Spy Story. Chicago 1987: University of Chicago Press, 2.
3 Horn, Eva: The Secret War. Treason, Espionage, and Modern Fiction. Transl. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. Evanston 2013: Northwestern University Press, 24.
4 On the relationship between heroism and perpetration, see Giesen, Bernhard: Triumph and Trauma. London 2004: Paradigm, 6.
5 Fleming, Ian: Casino Royale. London 2006: Penguin, 68.
6 Sauerberg, Lars Ole: Secret Agents in Fiction. Ian Fleming, John le Carré and Len Deighton. London 1984: Macmillan, 113-114.
7 Volkman, Ernest: The History of Espionage. The Clandestine World of Surveillance, Spying and Intelligence, from Ancient Times to the Post-9/11 World. London 2007: Carlton Books.
8 In addition to the titles already mentioned, see also Denning, Michael: Cover Stories. Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller. London 1987: Routledge; Hindersmann, Jost: Der britische Spionageroman. Vom Imperialismus bis zum Ende des Kalten Krieges. Darmstadt 1995: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
9 Wark, Wesley: "Introduction: Fictions of History". In: Wark, Wesley (Ed.): Spy Fiction, Spy Films, and Real Intelligence. London/New York 1991: Routledge, 1-16, 4. In this volume also the contribution from Trotter, David: "The Politics of Adventure in the Early British Spy Novel". In: Wark, Wesley (Ed.): Spy Fiction, Spy Films, and Real Intelligence. London/New York 1991: Routledge, 30-54.
10 See more specifically Korte, Barbara: "Tough or Tongue in Cheek? Heroic Performances of Bond from Page to Screen". In: Frenk, Joachim / Krug, Christian (Eds.): The Cultures of James Bond. Trier 2011: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 25-38.
11 Morgan, Ted: Somerset Maugham. London 1980: Cape, 313.
12 Wark: "Introduction: Fictions of History", 1991, 5.
13 Le Carré, John: The Spy Who Came from the Cold. London 2014: Penguin, 243.
14 See for example Bauman, Zygmunt / Lyon, David: Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation. Cambridge 2013: Polity; Lyon, David: Surveillance Studies. An Overview. Cambridge 2007: Polity and currently Lyon, David: Surveillance after Snowden. London 2015: Polity

4. Selected literature

Bauman, Zygmunt / Lyon, David: Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation. Cambridge 2013: Polity Press.
Bloom, Clive: Spy Thrillers. From Buchan to Le Carré. Basingstoke 1990: Macmillan.
Brittany, Michele: James Bond and Popular Culture. Essays on the Influence of the Fictional Superspy. Jefferson NC 2014: McFarland.
Cawelti, John G. / Rosenberg, Bruce A. (Eds.): The Spy Story. Chicago 1987: University of Chicago Press.
Denning, Michael: Cover Stories. Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller. London 1987: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Fleming, Ian: Casino Royale. London 2006: Penguin.
Giesen, Bernhard: Triumph and Trauma. London 2004: Paradigm.
Hindersmann, Jost: Der britische Spionageroman. Vom Imperialismus bis zum Ende des Kalten Krieges. Darmstadt 1995: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
Horn, Eva: The Secret War. Treason, Espionage, and Modern Fiction. Transl. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. Evanston 2013: Northwestern University Press.
Korte, Barbara: “Tough or Tongue in Cheek? Heroic Performances of Bond from Page to Screen”. In: Frenk, Joachim / Krug, Christian (Eds.): The Cultures of James Bond. Trier 2011: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 25-38.
Korte, Barbara: Geheime Helden. Spione in der Populärkultur des 21. Jahrhunderts. Göttingen 2017: Wallstein.
Le Carré, John: The Spy Who Came In from the Cold. London 2014: Penguin.
Lyon, David: Surveillance after Snowden. London 2015: Polity.
Lyon, David: Surveillance Studies. An Overview. Cambridge 2007: Polity Press.
Morgan, Ted: Somerset Maugham. London 1980: Cape.
Sauerberg, Lars Ole: Secret Agents in Fiction. Ian Fleming, John le Carré and Len Deighton. London 1984: Macmillan.
Stafford, David A. T.: “Spies and Gentlemen. The Birth of the British Spy Novel, 1893–1914”. In: Victorian Studies vol. 24, no. 4 (1981), 489-509.
Trotter, David: “The Politics of Adventure in the Early British Spy Novel”. In: Wark, Wesley (Ed.): Spy Fiction, Spy Films, and Real Intelligence. London/New York 1991: Routledge, 30-54.
Volkman, Ernest: The History of Espionage. The Clandestine World of Surveillance, Spying and Intelligence, from Ancient Times to the Post-9/11 World. London 2007: Carlton.
Wark, Wesley: “Introduction. Fictions of History”. In: Wark, Wesley (Ed.): Spy Fiction, Spy Films, and Real Intelligence. London/New York 1991: Routledge, 1-16.

Citation

Barbara Korte: Spies. In: Compendium heroicum, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2023-08-11. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/spe1.0.20230811

Meta data

DOI	10.6094/heroicum/spe1.0.20230811
Licence	Creative Commons BY-ND 4.0
Category	Hero Types

Subject Headings (LOC)	Fictions, Theory of, Heroes, Heroes in literature, James Bond films, Secret service, Spies, Spy films, Spy stories, Spies in literature
Index	Authors: Barbara Korte Persons and Figures: James Bond (figure), Edward Snowden, Ian Fleming, William Tufnell Le Queux, John Erskine, John Buchan, Richard Hannay, William Somerset Maugham, John Le Carré, Eric Ambler, Graham Greene, Jason Bourne (figure), Oliver Stone, Daniel Craig Spaces and Locations: Great Britain, German Reich, Germany, USA, Near East Time and Events: 20th century, 21st century, World War I / First World War, World War II / Second World War, Cold War

Compendium heroicum

Das Online-Lexikon des Sonderforschungsbereichs 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
an der Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg

In Kooperation mit dem Open Encyclopedia System der Freien Universität Berlin
www.open-encyclopedia-system.org

Gefördert von der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft

Kontakt

Sonderforschungsbereich 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg
Hebelstraße 25
D-79104 Freiburg im Breisgau

www.compendium-heroicum.de
redaktion@compendium-heroicum.de