



Hidden Agenda

politics and the thriller

The political thriller has proved an attractive format for film and television producers in recent years.

John Hill surveys the history of the genre and focuses on *Hidden Agenda* — Ken Loach's study of conspiracy set in Northern Ireland



Ken Loach, *Hidden Agenda*, 1990.

"The conspiracy drama with its hero trying but failing to penetrate the heart of darkness becomes a perfect form for 80s writers", argued a recent edition of BBC2's *The Late Show* (11 March, 1991). Reviewing British culture of the 1980s, the programme illustrated this thesis with extracts from three major political thrillers of the period: the 1985 film *Defence of the Realm* and the two television series, *Edge of Darkness* (1985) and *A Very British Coup* (1988). It represents a very significant body of work and it has now been added to with the arrival of Ken Loach and Jim Allen's *Hidden Agenda* (1990) which, like its precursors, is a political thriller, this time setting out to investigate events both in Northern Ireland (the question of a 'shoot to kill' policy in the early 1980s) and Britain (the 'dirty tricks' campaigns of the security services during the 1970s). In a number of respects, however, the film must be judged an honourable failure. While it deserves credit for tackling topics that most contemporary cinema would prefer to shy away from, and for being prepared to ask uncomfortable questions about the role of the security services in both Britain and Northern Ireland, the manner in which it deals with these issues is problematic.¹

This is partly an issue of cinematic approach. Ken Loach is a distinguished television and film director whose achievements have included such notable work as *Cathy Come Home* (1966), *Kes* (1969) and *Days of Hope* (1975). The characteristic

feature of Loach's work, however, has been his attraction to naturalism and preference for low-key, dampened down narratives shot in an apparently casual and unobtrusive visual style. The thriller, with its tight, interlocking patterns of narration and melodramatic conventions of suspense, is not therefore a format with which Loach, by either experience or temperament, appears comfortable. As a result, *Hidden Agenda* appears to fall between two stools: offering neither the narrative energy and visual expressiveness of the best thrillers nor the authenticity and distance from conventional dramatics which has been to date a feature of Loach's familiar naturalism.

One indication of this problem is found in the film's deployment of visual imagery. The cinematic thriller is, in origins, a North American genre which has evolved an elaborate iconography of dress, objects (eg cars, guns) and settings, often in relation to specific places (eg Los Angeles). Such icons are not inanimate but cue many of the genre's characteristic meanings. Thus, as film-makers have often discovered, it is not always easy to simply transplant the thriller to a novel environment (think of the problems of thrillers set amidst the streets and traffic of London).

In the case of *Hidden Agenda*, the problem is of finding the right iconography for a thriller set in Belfast. The film opts for the archetypal imagery of the 'troubles': an orange band, murals, a cemetery, religious icons and security forces in the streets. The

problem with this is that while such images clearly conform to the thriller's demands for the dramatic and striking, and also cue an audience in the way that thriller icons conventionally do, they only do so by virtue of being the most obvious and, indeed, clichéd of images. Thus, a film which, at the level of manifest content, seeks to challenge dominant perceptions of the 'troubles' actually reinforces them at the level of formal imagery. The thriller format, in this respect, has encouraged an easy acceptance of conventional ways of depicting the city, and thus the 'troubles', but at the expense of the freshness of observation and absence of contrivance which might normally have been expected of Loach's naturalism (although, it should be said, that naturalism is by no means the only way to subvert dominant images as *Reefer and the Model's* adaptation of the thriller car chase to the iconography of the West of Ireland has amusingly demonstrated).

As this argument suggests, however, the fundamental issue is not whether Ken Loach makes good thrillers but whether thrillers make good politics. My concern, in this regard, is that while the political thriller may, indeed, have proved an attractive and congenial format for film and television producers in the 1980s, it has not necessarily provided, *pace The Late Show*, the "perfect form" for the successful expression of political ideas or the encouragement of political reflection. This is not, of course, a new concern but it is one which is less commonly aired than it used to be. Given my sense of the shortcomings of *Hidden Agenda*, however, it may be helpful to return to the debate which originally accompanied the rise of the political thriller as a way of clarifying what could be at stake. In this, I was, in part, prompted by Derek Malcolm's description of the film in *The Guardian* (17 May, 1990) as a "political thriller ... that might have been made by Costa-Gavras" for it was, of course, the work of Costa-Gavras which was to fuel so much of the discussion which followed.²

The background to the debate was the worldwide social and political upheavals of the 1960s when it was only to be expected that questions regarding what political role films could perform would come to the forefront. While this was, in part, an economic matter (of how radical films could and should be financed, produced and exhibited) it was also an artistic one, concerned with what type of political film it was most valuable to make and promote. At its most basic, this latter debate revolved around the question of how far it was possible to make a radical film employing conventional cinematic forms and two directors, in particular, seemed to crystallise the choices at hand. On the one hand, the films of Jean-Luc Godard, especially from *La Chinoise* (1967) onwards, demonstrated an insistence on the need for revolutionary messages (or content) to be accompanied by an appropriate revolutionary form and were characterised by a delib-

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Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*, 1967.

erate abandonment of the Hollywood conventions of linear narrative, individual, psychologically-rounded characters and a convincing dramatic illusion. By contrast, the films of Costa-Gavras, beginning with his exposé of political assassinations, *Z* (1969), exemplified a model of political film-making which sought to bend mainstream Hollywood conventions to radical political ends. Costa-Gavras had already made a straightforward crime film, *The Sleeping Car Murders*, in 1965 and, with *Z*, embarked upon a series of films (including *Missing* (1982) and *Betrayal* in 1988 for Hollywood itself) which attempted to 'sugar the pill' of radical politics with the 'entertainment' provided by the conventions of the thriller. For supporters of political thrillers, their great strength was their ability to both excite and maintain the interest of an audience who would normally be turned off by politics; for their detractors, the weakness of such films was that their use of popular forms inevitably diluted or compromised their capacity to be genuinely politically radical and to stimulate active political thought. From this point of view, radical political purposes were more likely to be bent to the ends of mainstream Hollywood than vice versa.

What critics of political thrillers were highlighting was how the use of the general conventions of narrative and realism typical of classic Hollywood and the specific conventions characteristic of the crime story or thriller would, by their nature, encourage certain types of political perspectives and discourage others. Hollywood's narrative conventions characteristically encourage explanations of social realities in individual and psychological terms rather than economic and political ones, while the conventions of realism, with their requirement of a convincing (or realistic) dramatic illusion, not only highlight observable, surface realities at the expense of, possibly more fundamental, underlying ones but also inevitably attach a greater significance to interpersonal relations than social, economic and political structures.³ And, it is because of these tendencies, implicit in the conventions of Hollywood's narrative realism, that political thrillers so often gravitate towards

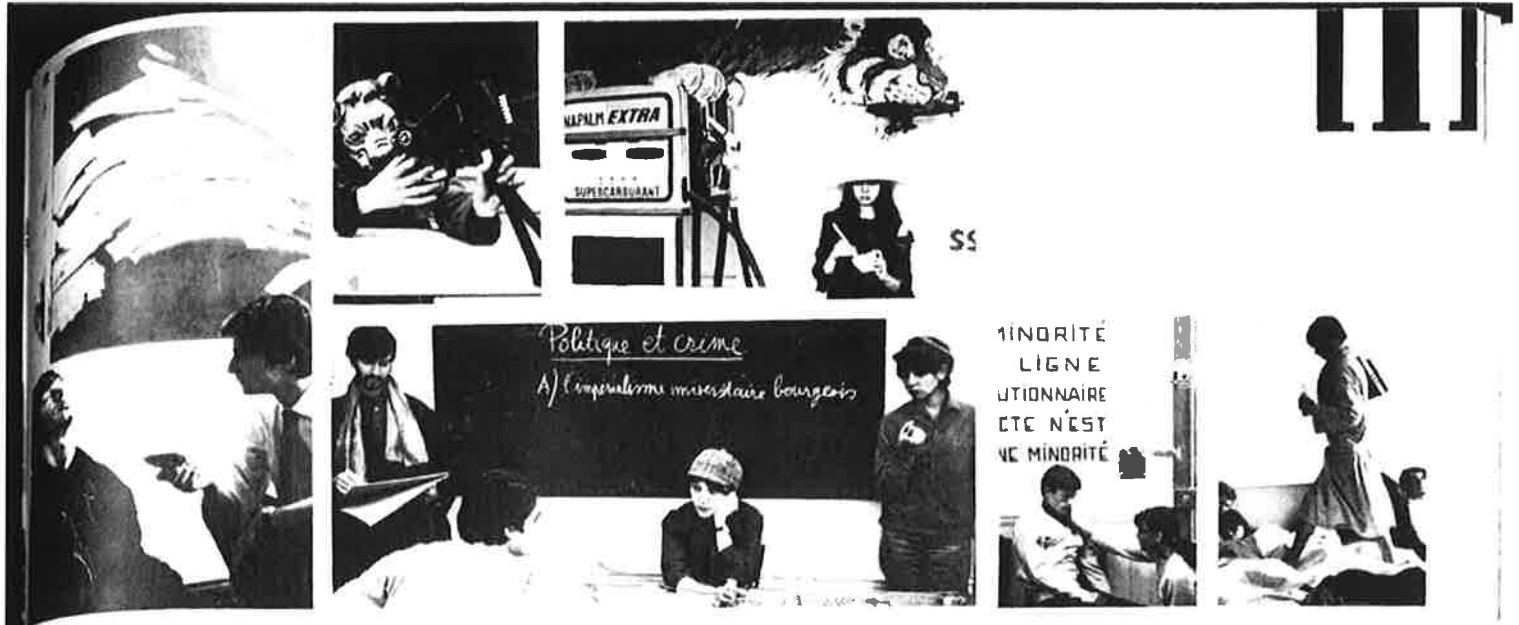
conspiracy theory or, as Newman drolly observes of US thrillers of the 70s, the view that society and government is run on "the same principles as the coven in *Rosemary's Baby*".⁴ Conspiratorial actions can be dramatised in a way that underlying social and economic forces cannot within the conventions of narrative and realism and, hence, 'conspiracy' becomes the preferred form of 'explanation' for how power is exercised in society and how events are to be accounted for. Thus, in *Days of Hope*, Loach and Allen present the failure of the British 1926 General Strike as simply the result of individual treachery on the part of labour and trade union leaders; while in *Hidden Agenda* no less than two conspiracies are revealed — both the conspiracy to pervert the course of justice by the security services in Northern Ireland in the early 80s, and the conspiracy on the part of a small group of businessmen, security personnel and politicians to overthrow a labour government, and to replace Edward Heath by Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party in Britain in the 70s.

To be fair to the film-makers they appear, on the basis of the revelations of Colin Wallace, Fred Holroyd (who acted as adviser to the film) and the magazine *Lobster*, to be convinced of the evidence for conspiracy in 70s Britain. And, there is undoubtedly a case to be answered. Conspiracy, nonetheless, seems to provide a singularly problematic basis for political analysis and explanation and is certainly of little value in helping us understand the crisis of social democracy and labourism which occurred during the 1970s, and the subsequent rise to power of the new right. According to Derek Malcolm, "the film seems almost ludicrously committed to a view of recent British history that could only be sustained by the most paranoid of Marxists". On the contrary, it seems to me that the viewpoint of the film is fundamentally a liberal one, laying stress on the capacity of strong individuals to will change and alter events almost outside of history. What is lacking is some sense of the context in which such actions occurred and the constraints imposed upon them. The rise of the new right was not simply manufac-

tured but grew out of a complex set of economic, political and ideological circumstances.⁵ Conspiracy would at most have been a response to those circumstances just as the likelihood of its success would have depended upon them. Conspiracy theory, in this respect, has the virtue of neatness but it is also at the expense of genuine social and political complexity.

However, if Malcolm is inaccurate in his observations on the film's politics, he does have a point, nonetheless, regarding the seemingly 'ludicrous' way the conspiracy theory is presented. Once again, this seems to be a problem which stems from the film's choice of conventions. For given the limitations of what the political thriller, within the conventions of realism, can show, it is often the case that a character is required to state verbally the film's preferred explanation of events. The danger of this is that the very conventions of the film, which rely upon the creation of a convincing dramatic illusion, risk being ruptured by virtue of the implausibility of the speeches which characters have to make in order for the film's politics to emerge clearly (thus, in Oliver Stone's 1986 film, *Salvador*, for example, characters are often required to make political points which do not seem to grow naturally out of their situation). In the same way, the incredulity of the audience towards the conspiracy in *Hidden Agenda* is not only the result of the extravagance of the claims made but also the apparent implausibility of the way in which the film is forced to engineer a situation in which a senior tory politician and senior member of MI5 are provided with the opportunity both to admit to and explain what they have done and why. Dramatic conviction is also undermined by the propensity of the film, in line with the personalising tendencies of its conventions, simply to conflate political villainy and personal unpleasantness (and thus heavily-handedly insert such lines as "Ireland would be a lovely place if it wasn't for the Irish" into the mouth of MI5 conspirator Neil).

These tendencies (personalisation and dependency on the plainly visible) are also reinforced by the specific properties of the crime thriller, especially when structured



around the investigation of an individual detective and his quest to reveal, or make visible, the truth behind a crime or enigma. However, the criminal investigation structure also presents the radical film-maker with a specific problem of its own. For, as a number of critics have suggested, the detective story formula is a characteristically conservative one.⁶ It depends upon the superior powers (either intellectual or physical) of an individual investigator and, hence, tends to prefer the loner to the group and individualism to collectivism. Moreover, the conventional narrative movement towards a solution of the crime will both encourage an identification with the forces of 'law and order' (even when the investigator is not actually a member of the police) and a general confidence in the ability of the current social set-up to triumph over injustice and right wrongs (which are then characteristically identified as the responsibility of an isolated or atypical individual rather than social institutions or political regimes). It is, in part, in recognition of these problems that political

thrillers have attempted to blunt the affirmative and socially conservative impulses of the crime story by stressing the limitations of the individual detective hero and the difficulties of actually getting to the truth. Thus, the investigator may prove unable to solve the crime due to the complexity and deviousness of the forces confronting him or he may, indeed, succeed in solving the mystery but then find himself unable to do anything about it (the most paranoid example of which is undoubtedly *The Parallax View* (1974) in which Warren Beatty's reporter uncovers the inevitable political conspiracy but is then himself assassinated).

Hidden Agenda adopts a similar, if less dramatic, strategy. The detective Kerrigan (loosely based on John Stalker) uncovers evidence of both a shoot to kill policy and a conspiracy to overthrow a democratically elected Labour government, but is unable to make use of the information, having been effectively silenced by the military and political forces arrayed against him. Admittedly Ingrid from the *League for Civil*

Liberties, and the widow of the murdered Paul, still has the incriminating tape in her possession at the film's end. However, given that the film has already made clear that the tape will lack credibility without Harris (whom we now know to be dead at the hands of the security services), the pessimism of the film's ending remains unchallenged.

While such an ending avoids glib optimism about the prospect of social reform, the obvious limitation of its negative inflection of the thriller format is not only the characteristic paranoia of political thrillers which it projects but also the sense of powerlessness which it engenders about the possibilities for social and political change. Ironically, Loach himself has criticised the limited politics of his own *Cathy Come Home* on precisely these grounds. "It tried to make people concerned about a problem", he observes, "but it gave them no indication of how they might do anything about it".⁷ However, if this is the case with *Cathy Come Home's* treatment of homelessness, it seems even more



Costa-Gavras, *Missing*, 1982.



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so of *Hidden Agenda's* grim brew of conspiracy and paranoia. If *Cathy Come Home* simply rested upon the hope that by exposing social ills it could do some good, *Hidden Agenda* not only offers no solutions but, by virtue of its conviction that making the security services democratically accountable is virtually impossible, seems to undermine even the limited assumption that its revelations might be of some political value. From this point of view, one possible explanation for the popularity of the political thriller with film and television producers during the 1980s was the way in which it allowed expression of the sense of political impotence felt by liberals and the left during this period (notwithstanding the attempts at optimism grafted onto *A Very British Coup* and *Defence of the Realm*).

This concern about the absence of any perspective for political change is linked to the final criticism which has traditionally been directed at the political thriller. For whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the actual message which the political thriller succeeds in communicating, it is still one that is, so to speak, 'pre-digested'. That is to say, opponents of the political thriller have argued that by virtue of a reliance upon individual characters and 'stars' with

whom we identify, and upon the tightly structured patterns of narrative suspense which engage us emotionally rather than intellectually, the political thriller 'makes up our minds for us'. It may challenge, as *Hidden Agenda* does, the prevailing ideologies of society but it does so by employing the same emotional patterns of involvement as films which offer the contrary view and hence fails to encourage audiences to critically engage with the political ideas. To some extent, this is true of *Hidden Agenda* which is generally content to present us with an interpretation of events which we can either take or leave, rather than to engage us actively in political dialogue. It does make some attempt however to meet this type of complaint.

While, in comparison to Loach's earlier work, the film uses relatively well known actors it does not seek to encourage identification with individual characters so much as with their situation. Thus, the 'honest cop' Kerrigan represents more of a type than a fully fleshed out hero. In the same way, by staging the killing of Paul early on in the film, the reliance of the narrative on delayed reactions and the mechanics of suspense is kept to a minimum. However, neither tactic is used to any particular purpose with the result that they simply add

to the inertness of the film as a thriller without providing any compensating political vigour.

While it is certainly the case that *Hidden Agenda*, both politically and as a thriller, may be poorer than many in the political thriller genre, it does seem legitimate, nonetheless, to use this as the basis for a more general discussion of the relations between politics and film. While in the 1970s the weight of left critical opinion was probably against the political thriller, during the 1980s it was undoubtedly restored to critical favour. This was due, in part, to a more general waning of sixties social and political radicalism and, hence, a greater tolerance of and, indeed, in the dark 80s, even gratitude for, the modest politics which the thriller form could supply. The hybrid nature of the political thriller (and its crossing of conventional barriers such as that between fact and fiction) also found increasing favour in a cultural climate dominated by postmodernism. The declining confidence in both political and artistic vanguardism associated with these trends also encouraged greater support for the strategies of the political thriller in comparison with what seemed to be the intellectualism and inaccessibility of the 'revolutionary text' as ex-

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emplified by the work of Godard. In reviving some of the criticisms of the political thriller, I am not then advocating a return to the Godardian or 'counter cinema' model of political film-making. Indeed, what I want to suggest is that two of the major weaknesses of the political thriller debate were that it was characteristically premised on crude binary oppositions (either the political thriller or the revolutionary avant-garde, either Costa-Gavras or Godard), and a simplistic assumption that certain artistic strategies (primarily Brechtian) would guarantee political radicalism. It is in this context that the revival of the third cinema debate is so welcome.⁸

The concept of 'third cinema' was initially employed by Argentinian film-makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino to identify an emergent political cinema that was distinct from both mainstream Hollywood (first cinema) and European 'art' cinema (second cinema). Current usage of the term has continued to emphasise the commitment of a third cinema to political explanation and dialogue but has also recognised that this commitment cannot be fulfilled by any pre-given artistic recipes. As Paul Willemen has argued, third cinema is committed to "new, politically illuminating types of filmic discourse" but it is also aware of "the historical variability of the necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted."⁹ What artistic means are appropriate to third cinema, therefore, will vary according to the social, political and cultural context in which it is produced and to which it is addressed. The virtue of third cinema, in this respect, is that, unlike models of counter-cinema, it does not prescribe one 'correct' way of making political cinema which is universally applicable but recognises the need for aesthetic diversity and a sensitivity to place and social and cultural specifics. In doing so, it also insists upon the importance of constantly re-thinking and re-working (but not necessarily overthrowing) traditional artistic models (including those of both Hollywood and the avant-garde) if cinema is to continue to be critically lucid and politically incisive. As Willemen suggests, "the only stable thing about Third Cinema is its attempt to speak



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a socially pertinent discourse which both the mainstream and authorial cinemas exclude from their regimes of signification."¹⁰ The weaknesses of *Hidden Agenda*, in this regard, are its acceptance of, rather than critical engagement with, mainstream or first cinema conventions and, hence, its inability to come to grips satisfactorily with the social and political complexities of the Northern Ireland situation.

John Hill

1. For a discussion of how the cinema has characteristically dealt with the 'troubles' and, hence, a measure of the extent to which *Hidden Agenda* deals with questions not normally confronted, see my analysis of 'images of violence' in K. Rockett, L. Gibbons and J. Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, Routledge, London, 1988.

2. One of the most influential statements was undoubtedly the English translation of Guy Hennebelle's article, *Z Movies, or What Hath Costa-Gavras Wrought* which appeared in *Cinéaste*, Vol.6, No.2, 1974. For a retrospective overview of the 'Costa-Gavras debate', see John J Michalczyk, *Costa-Gavras: The Political Fiction Film*, Associated University Presses, London and Toronto, 1984.

3. For a fuller discussion of these matters see my *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63*, British Film Institute, London, 1986, ch. 3, *Narrative and Realism*.

4. *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Movie from 1986*, Bloomsbury, London, 1988, p79.

5. For a discussion of these circumstances and an indication of their complexity, see Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*, MacMillan, London, 1988; Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road To Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Verso, London, 1988; and Bob Jessop et al, *Thatcherism*, Polity Press, Oxford 1988.

6. For a trenchant critique of the social conservatism of the crime story, see Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*, Pluto Press, London, 1984

7. Ken Loach — *Politics, Protest and the Past*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1987, p96

8. See Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (ed.), *Questions of Third Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1989.

9. *ibid.*

10. *ibid.*

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