

# Book Review: In Secrecy's Shadow: The OSS and CIA in Hollywood Cinema, 1941-1979 by Simon Willmetts

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*In Secrecy's Shadow: The OSS and CIA in Hollywood Cinema, 1941-1979* provides an extensive historical account of the birth and development of the relationship between Hollywood and US intelligence, in particular the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Author **Simon Willmetts** brings together historical analysis, close readings and archival research to offer a comprehensive, nuanced and insightful picture of the CIA both in and on film from the 1940s to the 1970s, writes **Tricia Jenkins**.

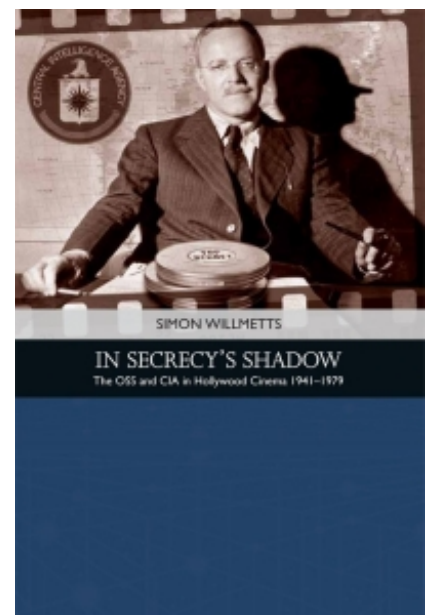
*In Secrecy's Shadow: The OSS and CIA in Hollywood Cinema, 1941-1979*. Simon Willmetts. Edinburgh University Press. 2016.

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Pairing archival research with close textual analysis, Simon Willmetts's new book, *In Secrecy's Shadow: The OSS and CIA in Hollywood Cinema, 1941-1979*, provides an extensive history of the relationship between filmmakers, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Focusing on the years between 1941 and 1979, Willmetts demonstrates how this relationship came to gradually reflect the 'breakdown of the consensus vision of American history' or, put more bluntly, how Americans came to stop trusting their government.

Willmetts divides the films he discusses into four cinematic forms. The first, the Semi-Documentary Melodrama (1945-58), were films that dramatised real events and were often made with the cooperation and assistance of OSS head, General William Donovan, and other agency veterans. Unsurprisingly, these celebrated the agency's wartime successes and reflected faith in the 'official stories' that government agencies put forth. By the time of the Gary Powers U-2 spy plane incident, as well as the Bay of Pigs fiasco, however, that faith had begun to erode, giving birth to a group of texts that Willmetts classifies as Ironic/Camp Romance. These texts, which include TV series such as *Get Smart* (1965-70) and *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-68), were far more concerned with camp, artifice and satire than the authenticity of government accounts, which had previously rested at the centre of the semi-documentary.

Little time is spent on the texts of the late 1960s that Willmetts classifies as Tragic Realism (1966-72), mostly because, according to him, this was primarily a British phenomenon (think John le Carré's *The Spy that Came in from the Cold* (1965)) that barely found a home as an American cinematic style. Instead, Willmetts devotes more of his time to conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s, popularised by films such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *Scorpio* (1973) and others. Collectively, this body of films showcased the now fully-formed distrust of US citizens regarding both covert action and government agencies, spawned, of course, by the reporting of Seymour Hersh, Watergate and The Pentagon Papers. Near the end of his book, Willmetts argues that one of the impacts of these conspiracy thrillers was that the CIA formalised the existence of a Public Affairs Office in 1977 to help revamp its tarnished image in the public press, as 'information management had replaced their decades-old policy of blanket secrecy' (261).





**Image Credit: Hollywood Sign, Black and White, CA, KW ([traveljunction](#))**

Indeed, one of the most insightful discussions of the book revolves around the fact that for the first decade of its existence, the CIA was virtually absent from the public consciousness and thus enjoyed a Golden Age of covert action that led to an inflated sense of self-confidence and virtually no oversight. This era was partly due to CIA policy, which, unlike the FBI's, regularly refused to lend its seal of approval to television and film productions, threatened to discourage pictures about espionage and frequently asked studio lawyers to ensure that all direct references to the Agency be removed from scripts. Because the film industry's Production Code also required government approval of any script featuring a state agency, Hollywood tended to use fictional institutions when discussing espionage, until later defamation laws and the weakening of McCarthyism changed the cinematic landscape.

But while filmmakers may have not made films *about* the CIA, Willmetts is quick to point out that, at least in the 1950s, filmmakers still made films *for* the CIA. He documents the familiar cases of *Animal Farm* (1954) and *The Quiet American* (1958) – complicating the role that the CIA, personal antipathies and the Production Code played in the latter. Most current scholarship argues that director Joseph Mankiewicz changed the ending of Graham Greene's novel to paint a far more sympathetic picture of the US and its policies in *The Quiet American* at the request of CIA officer Edward Lansdale. However, Willmetts's research shows that Lansdale merely confirmed changes to the novel that the director had already made, arguing that most of these alterations can be explained by Mankiewicz's attempts to preempt the objections that the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) or the Production Code Administration would pose regarding the script, especially relating to Thomas Pyle's depiction as a government agent, his adulterous affair with a Vietnamese woman and the novel's portrayal of opium use. Thus, while the CIA may have had a small hand in helping the director with rewrites and securing locations (the film was made in Vietnam with the Diem government's permission), most of the script changes, argues Willmetts, are best explained by the political climate and the industry standards that governed cinema at the time.

While Willmetts often covers familiar ground and his overall argument is unsurprising, even readers well-versed in Hollywood's relationship with the CIA will find plenty of new information here. For instance, almost nothing has hitherto been written about Mankiewicz's production company, Figaro Entertainment, which worked with Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles to create an officially-sanctioned CIA series in the 1950s. The project was eventually pulled, in part out of concern that the agency operating domestically, even on a TV show, would violate its charter, which only allows it to operate overseas. Likewise, scholars may be surprised to learn that the CIA allowed

*Scorpio*, a highly damning film about the Agency, to film on its campus after California Senator John Tunney put in a request on behalf of the filmmakers. Apparently, the request was approved without anyone at the Agency ever asking to see the script – a humiliation that was so profound it seems to have been struck from the Agency’s official history, which now claims that Showtime’s *In the Company of Spies* (1999) was the first movie made with official CIA cooperation.

Overall, *In Secrecy’s Shadow* employs close readings of many films, coupled with historical context and an industry studies perspective, to provide readers with a comprehensive, nuanced and insightful picture of the CIA both in and on film from the 1940s to the 1970s. Libraries should certainly acquire the text, as its prose is highly readable, its information rich and its subject matter important to understandings of intelligence, propaganda and cinematic history.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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