

US cable channel whitewashes the CIA

Into the Shadows: The CIA in Hollywood, written, produced and directed by Charles C. Stuart

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The US cable television channel American Movie Classics (AMC), devoted to broadcasting Hollywood films of the past, aired its own special on December 4. *Into the Shadows: The CIA in Hollywood* is as revealing for what it omits as what it presents. From its title and the breathless quality of the narration, the viewer might have reasonably expected an exposé of the filthy deeds of the spy outfit and its connections to the American film industry. Instead, however, the show, with its pseudo- *film noir* veneer, essentially depicts the CIA as a life-saving, humanitarian entity. The program amounts to little more than a propaganda piece to improve the agency's image at a time when it is playing a central role in the US war drive. Indeed the show might rightfully be considered an element in one of the agency's own "disinformation" campaigns.

Against a background of "suspenseful" music, the narration, read by prominent liberal Democrat actor Alec Baldwin, initially tantalizes by suggesting that the CIA has involved the entertainment industry in clandestine and sometimes "sordid" operations. The tone then quickly shifts and becomes sycophantic toward one of the world's most hated and discredited organizations.

The program is more or less given over to Tony Mendez, introduced as the former CIA chief of disguise. Needing some *Mission Impossible* -style help in the 1960s, Mendez approached Disney Studios, founded by right-winger Walt Disney, and enlisted the help of an award-winning makeup specialist, John Chambers. Chambers' skills were used to put together "disguise kits" with which CIA operatives went into the field. A company that Chambers later formed with fellow makeup expert Tom Burman was called upon to

design masks, concoct fake personas and phony companies for CIA missions in Laos, Poland, the USSR and Iran.

The show provides only two or three examples of these missions. In one case Hollywood talent was used to effect the 1979 escape from Iran of six American diplomats. The latter had taken refuge in the Canadian embassy during the student takeover of the US embassy following the overthrow of the shah. Every detail of this rather trivial enterprise is discussed. No mention is made, of course, of the bloody repression carried out by the secret police, the notorious SAVAK, which the CIA helped set up and train, under the shah's regime.

In order to appease the angry Iranian populace and perhaps win the release of the American hostages held by the students, thought was also given at the time to a scheme to fake the death of the shah, who was in the US undergoing cancer treatment. An individual was hired and work was done to prepare him to impersonate the shah. The "fake shah caper" came to naught, but the tale was told to highlight the "extraordinary work" of the CIA. The other story concerns the production of masks for a black CIA operative in Laos during the Vietnam War so that he could pass through checkpoints undetected.

This is all very sanitized and unreal. The program fails to answer the obvious question: how often were Hollywood talents put to use in the course of assassination plots, the overthrowing of governments and mass killings?

In fact, Mendez explains that his hope is that the program will counteract Hollywood's too-often portrayal of "the CIA as the bad guy, and give a more balanced view of what spies do; that they are not the

dregs of humanity.” In the not-so-distant past, it would have been unthinkable for film industry technicians and artists to openly acknowledge collaboration with these “dregs of humanity.” The agency’s crimes in Iran, Chile, Central America, Vietnam and elsewhere were too well known. It is not the CIA and its assets who have changed, but the liberal and media establishment, which now chooses to portray Mendez and the others as “unsung heroes.”

In the second portion of *Into the Shadows*, entitled *Hollywood Goes to War*—referring to the present conflict in Afghanistan—the program’s makers interview figures such as Michael Bay, director of *Pearl Harbor*, and Steven E. de Souza, scriptwriter for *Die Hard*. In the light of current efforts to enlist Hollywood’s support for the new war drive, the show’s producers apparently want to make clear that there is a precedent for such government use of the entertainment industry.

In a cursory review of the postwar period, the program notes that President Eisenhower set up a department of “psychological warfare” which availed itself of the talents of screenwriter Howard Hunt, among others, who was later to become a Watergate burglar. It also reveals, significantly, that an unnamed CIA mole was charged with changing Hollywood scripts during the 1950s and removing any portrayals of Americans as “racist, drunk or trigger-happy”! This is passed over rather quickly. In other words, at the same time as the US government was denouncing the Soviet Stalinist state-run “propaganda” machinery, it was employing spies to monitor and alter the content of American films. (This was necessary to finish whatever was left undone by the blacklist and the anticommunist witch-hunt.)

In regard to the present situation, the program glowingly explains how Hollywood technology is used to aid the US war effort. Like a scene out of *Wag the Dog*, we are shown a soldier being trained with virtual reality technology at the Institute for Creative Technologies near Los Angeles. The show also makes reference to the two meetings between Hollywood executives and representatives from the Bush administration in October and November [See: Hollywood enlists Bush’s war drive]. De Souza (*Die Hard*) talks about the government “brainstorming with Hollywood about future terrorist threats.” There is

consensus among the talking heads on the need to “balance patriotism and creativity and still make blockbusters.”

Into the Shadows unwittingly reveals the astonishingly low level of principle and morality that dominates the Hollywood scene. Fittingly, all the “artists” interviewed for the program were creators of dreadful films—*Pearl Harbor*, *Independence Day*, *Die Hard*, *Armageddon*, *The Patriot*. In summing up, Jonathan Hensleigh, screenwriter for *Armageddon*, explained his reason for altering a recent script that “showed the CIA as bad guys. My first instinct was not patriotism. I thought the script was in trouble commercially, that [Disney chief Michael] Eisner would not produce it.”

According to the AMC special the question that keeps the “patriotic” studio executives, screenwriters and directors awake at night, following September 11, is: “how can Hollywood embrace the new spirit of America and still succeed at the box office?” Director Ridley Scott’s soon-to-be-released *Black Hawk Down* about the US incursion into Somalia, a “humanitarian mission” in which thousands of Somalis died, received mention, presumably as a test of the new formula. The concerns in Hollywood, in their own way, have a certain legitimacy. It remains to be seen whether there will be serious popular interest in jingoistic, warmongering films.



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