

Salt leaves a bad taste in the mouth

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After directing a number of sensitive and socially aware films, Australian director Phillip Noyce has taken a major step backward with his new movie *Salt*, a tired post-Cold War thriller. Was this absolutely necessary?

Noyce, who put a good deal of thought and emotion into directing *The Quiet American* (2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and, to a lesser extent, *Catch a Fire* (2006), has with his new film reminded us of his inglorious past as the creator of such politically noxious works as *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), both based on right-wing potboilers by Tom Clancy.

Unhappily, Noyce's comments about his recent dilemmas and difficulties say a good deal about the ideological climate within which filmmakers have worked in recent decades and the ideas they have accumulated. Many of the latter have to do with the importance of commercial success as the only standard by which to measure a career.

Apparently disappointed by the box office failure of his film *Catch a Fire*, about Patrick Chamusso, a courageous fighter against South African apartheid in the 1980s, Noyce (born in 1950) complained: "I think that everything we thought would be appealing about the film turned out not to be appealing. That was just when Hollywood was discovering the 'terrorist' was a no-go for movie audiences. We know that now, but we didn't when we made the movie."

Is he implying that, in retrospect, he would have tailored his choices to conform to Hollywood's propaganda agenda? Perhaps *Salt* answers that question. (Another possible explanation for *Catch a Fire*'s failure, incidentally, was its tepid, not terribly convincing character.)

Salt, Angelina Jolie plays Evelyn Salt, a CIA operative. The film opens in North Korea where Evelyn is being tortured in a prison, a scene with overtones of cinematic sexploitation. Soon after, she is released in a swap for a North Korean agent. The movie jumps forward two years when she is happily married to a German arachnologist (August Diehl) and working behind a desk at CIA headquarters in Washington, DC.

A Russian defector named Orlov (veteran Polish actor Daniel Olbrychski) turns himself into the CIA and accuses Salt of being a Russian sleeper agent, alleging that her name is really Chernkov and that she was taken away by the KGB in infancy to be trained as a spy. The renegade claims the CIA agent is a mole who will trigger Day X and set into motion a war against the US. Evelyn protests, but does not stick around to be interrogated by her agency cohorts.

From here, the film becomes an unbelievable mish-mash of flying limbs and superhuman feats. The happy housewife morphs into the bionic woman, who continuously outmaneuvers her pursuing CIA colleagues Ted Winter (Liev Schreiber) and Peabody (Chiwetel Ejiofor). Whether she is meant to be cartoonish, à la Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series, or the genuine product of intense, specialized Russian training is not clear. But it is curious, since she single-handedly can penetrate the impenetrable, that she was not able to escape the North Koreans who presumably trail the Americans and Russians in technological wizardry. To offset some her character's lack of credibility, Jolie occasionally turns on the waterworks.

The film hinges on the question of Evelyn's loyalty. Is it to the good guys, the Americans, or to the bad guys, the Russians?—although answering the question never truly presents a challenge, given Jolie's stature and studio film formulae. Noyce's work moves from one implausible chase scene to another. Dizzying camera work and a

pounding score rev up when Jolie jumps into action. *Salt* is dramatically infantile, with puerile dialogue, and obliges actors to utter lines such as “Utilitarian is the new sexy.”

Salt is an empty, unpleasant film with a whiff of anticomunism. Having made important cinema, Noyce cannot successfully reprise the days of his 1990s spy movies. Although politically retrograde, those films had a certain artistic wholeness and naïveté to them. *Salt*, however, is both politically objectionable and makes no sense whatsoever.

The film’s production notes are a paean to the US intelligence community. Columbia Pictures producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura goes on stupidly about sleeper spies: “There’s something really mysterious and sexy about the notion that somebody could lie in wait—for decades, if necessary.” A 16-year veteran of the CIA served as consultant on the film and the spy agency is given a clean bill of health by Noyce, who, in several interviews, mentions nostalgically that his father worked for Z Special Force, the Australian equivalent of the OSS, forerunner to the CIA.

How can the man who made *The Quiet American*, a devastating portrayal of the bloody role played by CIA agents and their local operatives in the dying years of French colonial rule in Vietnam, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, an equally devastating depiction of the plight of the Aborigines in Australia and the cruelty of the authorities, and *Catch a Fire*, about armed struggle against Apartheid, direct a deplorable film like this?

Presumably the answer lies within the fatal limitations and contradictions of Cold War liberalism, along with the considerable political and economic pressures currently brought to bear on artists. For example, Miramax attempted to shelve *The Quiet American* following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

To explain, however, is not to condone. Artists such as Noyce give in rather easily.

When asked by *Comingsoon.net* what it was like to make a studio movie after years as an independent filmmaker, Noyce said: “I tell you what. It’s a relief to be able to know that whether your movie is good, bad or indifferent, [the studio] is going to sell it. And it’s a relief

to know that you don’t have to go around the world playing the part of the town crier yelling out, ‘Please come see my movie.’ The studio is going to bludgeon people to Eskimos in their igloos to feel that they owe it to themselves to get out to a cinema and watch *Salt*. That marketing machine is Hollywood’s greatest achievement because it’s a colonizing force that’s more effective even than the Romans were. After, they needed a sword to contain their empire but Hollywood owns the hearts and minds just through the work of publicists.”

So the global population must be artistically colonized! How enticing! Of course, Noyce is being ironic, in part. But the cynical ironizing reveals all too much. That Noyce can so easily move from *The Quiet American* to *Salt*, from CIA as Murder Inc. to CIA as heroic enterprise, points to a bad intellectual atmosphere. Can one imagine, for example, an Orson Welles—whose financial and other difficulties in the 1950s dwarfed anything Noyce has ever encountered—addressing his problems by directing a pro-FBI film at the time of the anticommunist purges?

What Noyce probably does not understand is that there are artistic consequences to playing fast and loose with big historical and social issues. One cannot turn socially progressive cinema on and off like a faucet. Many have made this mistake, convinced that they could make a piece of rubbish simply for the money and return unscathed. It doesn’t work that way. Filmmaking requires conscientiousness, even on the most banal projects. Like it or not, one eventually becomes what one does.

At this point, it seems, Noyce lacks a sufficient understanding of the world. In sum, the pressures on him as an artist to conform are greater than his grasp of social reality, including his own place within it.



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