

Atomic Blonde: The last days of the Cold War

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Directed by David Leitch; written by Kurt Johnstad; based on the graphic novel by Antony Johnston and Sam Hart

Set in 1989 before the fall of the Berlin Wall, *Atomic Blonde* is an action spy thriller starring Charlize Theron. Lorraine Broughton (Theron) is an MI6 [British foreign intelligence] agent sent to retrieve a secret list hidden in a wristwatch that has the names of every active agent in the Soviet Union. Should it fall into the wrong hands, we are told, it may extend the Cold War “another 40 years.” A fairly ludicrous premise to begin with.

Lorraine is sent to Berlin to retrieve “the list” and eliminate Satchel, a double agent working for the Soviet side who also killed her partner, MI6 agent James Gascogne (Sam Hargrave). She meets her contact, agent David Percival (James McAvoy), a hedonistic Berlin spy station chief who loves the city’s night life.

She is also joined by Delphine LaSalle (Sofia Boutella), a French agent naively seeking the excitement and intrigue of the espionage world. At the dramatic high point of the film, Lorraine and Percival have to smuggle an East German Stasi (secret police) officer codenamed Spyglass (Eddie Marsan) and his family across the border to West Berlin. Spyglass has memorized the contents of the list and is defecting before the KGB gets to him.

All of this is told in flashbacks by Lorraine to her MI6 handler Eric Gray (Toby Jones) and CIA agent Emmet Kurzfeld (John Goodman). Most of the film, however, is devoted to ambushes, shootings, car chases, hand-to-hand combat and people looking cool and extraordinarily chic in various bars, nightclubs, hotel rooms and so forth.

Since the film takes place in the 1980s, the soundtrack inevitably features the popular music of the time, namely disco and New Wave. Even the title of the

film is borrowed from a 1979 song by Blondie, “Atomic.” This reviewer enjoyed some of the music, but here it is used in a manipulative fashion. During fight and/or flight sequences, right on cue we hear a rock or disco track, which only adds to the cold, brutalizing effect. It has become something of a cliché in modern films.

The various decors and locales add up to a very glossy and sleek film. At times it feels like an advertisement for vodka, cigarettes or luxury cars, or all three. The insipid dialogue proves true to its comic book origins. There is not much of substance here, which is a little disappointing given the historical setting, but not surprising given the commercial and “artistic” interests involved.

The much lauded action sequences are bloody, violent and unrealistic. Lorraine seems to possess almost superhuman strength and agility, and the spectator is apparently supposed to suspend his or her disbelief. Some of the action pieces are effective, but always within definite limits. For action films to maintain any genuine suspense, the characters and their situations have to come to life in some interesting manner—otherwise we are left with largely meaningless choreography.

Atomic Blonde has next to nothing explicit to tell us about Cold War politics, but of course there is an ideological undercurrent at play here. Vaguely decadent and fun West Berlin is counterposed to rainy and dim East Berlin. The “counter-culture,” with its mohawk hairstyles and break dancers, is free to express itself in the West, but not so in the Stalinist East.

To underscore the point, a KGB villain bludgeons a young hip-hop captive with a skateboard and smashes his boombox in an effort to find out where a defector has gone. We see Lorraine go to an East German cinema where the only film playing is Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker*. Who would

ever want to see that boring rubbish? For those who don't know the work, Tarkovsky's film is slow and contemplative, the precise opposite of *Atomic Blonde*.

From a contemporary point of view, it all seems a bit ridiculous. Here the West is synonymous with freedom, rap and punk, lesbianism, what have you. The East is all cold and totalitarian. Not much fun.

In an interview on *uproxx.com*, director David Leitch spoke about what inspired him about the original story: "Berlin is all about the counterculture. I think that's one of the reasons why it spoke to me from the beginning and I go back to that first read of the script and understand the set piece. That's when I was thinking, 'Holy crap. This is taking place in Berlin. This should not be a stuffy noir. This is about counterculture. This is about rebellion. This is about rock and roll.'"

Thoughtful comments, clearly a substantial basis for a \$30 million film.

The irony of course, is that any self-respecting punk or rapper in the 1980s despised Ronald Reagan, the CIA and the Cold War. To be sure, there were plenty of youth in the Eastern bloc countries who longed for the material goods in the United States and the West, but the most advanced who protested in the fall of 1989 wanted *political* freedom in addition to social rights, not just access to a different "lifestyle."

Of course, it would never occur to Leitch to ask: what has occurred in the former Stalinist countries in the quarter-century since the fall of the Berlin Wall? Fascist and authoritarian parties and governments are on the rise in the region. The social conditions of the working class are a disaster. No fun at all.

In regard to the "free," "democratic" West? What's happened there? Their competing intelligence agencies possess surveillance abilities that would make the Stasi and KGB green with envy.

As for walls and borders, what about the US-Mexico border? Some 200 people died fleeing Stalinist East Germany during the existence of its reactionary wall, but at least 5,000 migrant deaths occurred along the US-Mexico frontier from 1994 to 2007 alone, according to the Human Rights National Commission of Mexico and the ACLU. One could go on...

Many of the spy films made even at the height of the Cold War (*The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Ugly American*, *The*

Ipcress File, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, *Torn Curtain*, *Funeral in Berlin*, *The Deadly Affair*, *The Looking Glass War*, *Scorpio*, etc.) were somewhat slow-paced and often morally ambiguous affairs. The exceptions, of course, were the James Bond and similar films (Matt Helm et al), but those were never taken seriously. It was taken for granted that there was something absurd and outsized about them.

A recent turning point in the "serious spy" genre came with the *Jason Bourne* films. Here some attention was paid to a coherent plot structure, but now the *raison d'être* of the film—despite its pseudo-antiestablishment surface—gravitated overwhelmingly to the action scenes, especially ones involving close hand-to-hand combat. Most of the spy films of the last 15 to 20 years have been violent and, not surprisingly, dull efforts.

We see the hero, for example, single-handedly disarm half a dozen enemies all in one room and all in the space of a few minutes, if that. The hero will usually be unarmed and able to get away in a car leading to an extended and pointless car chase in this or that part of the globe. We have seen all this before, it is tiring, tiresome and desensitizing.

One wonders why the villains/authorities don't simply shoot the suspect/target upon entering the scene, as they do in real life? But apparently it's best to leave one's brain in the lobby, when watching a contemporary Hollywood product.

So what is a major studio to do when audience members have seen this sort of film again and again, and potentially—dangerously!—may not rush to the theatre to fork over their cash? Well, along comes a film like *Atomic Blonde*. Here the protagonist is a woman, so not only is the nearly two hours of violence and mayhem acceptable, it is also marketable.



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