It is my distinct pleasure to introduce Anikó Imre’s CARGC Paper 15, “Secrets Without Agents: From Big Brother to Big Data.” This paper was originally delivered as the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication’s 2019 Distinguished Lecture in Global Communication on September 19, 2019 at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. While at CARGC, Anikó Imre taught a masterclass for CARGC fellows on popular media, populist nationalisms, and xenophobia. She also led a professional development workshop for our postdoctoral fellows.

Anikó Imre is a Professor of Cinematic Arts in the Division of Cinema and Media Studies in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, where she is also a member of the faculty advisory board in the Interdivisional Media Arts and Practice (iMAP) Division. She is a leading scholar of media globalization, television, socialism and (post)socialism, gender and sexuality, as well as race and postcoloniality. Amongst her numerous publications are TV Socialism (Duke University Press, 2016) and Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Post-Communist Media Cultures (MIT Press, 2009). She is the editor of East European Cinemas (AFI Film Readers, Routledge, 2005) and The Blackwell Companion to East European Cinemas (2012), and a co-editor of Transnational Feminism in Film and Media (Palgrave, 2007), Popular Television in the New Europe (Routledge, 2012). Her work has appeared in Feminist Media Studies, Media Industries, Television and New Media, The Journal of Popular Film and Television, amongst many others. She co-edits the Palgrave book series Global Cinemas and sits on the boards of Cinema and Media Journal, Global Media and Communication, Television and New Media, VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture, NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies, global-e: Twenty-First Century Global Dynamics, and other key publications.

CARGC Paper 15, “Secrets Without Agents,” examines the recent comeback of spy figures in television series and feature films, a global phenomenon particularly remarkable since the early 2010s. A quintessential agent of Cold War popular media, cinematic spy fiction’s heyday culminated in the 1950s and 60s, at the height of Cold War hostilities. That period was followed by a steady decline in the appeal of spies as representatives of superpowers’ struggles for moral superiority and political influence that characterized the Cold War, a loss of appeal corresponding roughly with the thawing of relations between the two blocks. Why and how, then, has the memory of the Cold War been resurrected in countless recent TV shows and movies, a long list that includes international blockbusters such as Atomic Blonde (dir. David Leitch, 2017), Red Sparrow (dir. Francis Lawrence, 2018), The Spy Who Dumped Me (dir. Susanna Fogel, 2018), and popular television dramas such as The Americans (FX, 2013–2018), Homeland.
(Showtime, 2011—), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Hulu, 2017—), *A Very Secret Service* (Arte, 2015), Deutschland 83 and 86 (AMC Networks and RTL, 2015—), 1983 (Netflix, 2016—), *Secret City* (Netflix, 2016—), or *The Spy* (Netflix, 2019—)? As Imre deftly shows, the recent infatuation for nostalgic Cold Ward aesthetics needs to be understood as part of a complex reevaluation of the Cold War that is decidedly contemporary. Recent spy figures resonate deeply with globally shared structures of feeling marked by ambiguity, allegory, and dystopia, which are characteristic of the current neoliberal moment, itself marked by the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the emergence of autocratic populisms worldwide. In CARGC Paper 15, Imre complicates Manichean understandings of Cold War spy fiction, offering a history of the spy genre that challenges dominant Western-centric accounts of the Cold War by focusing on socialist spy dramas, produced in the East. TV series such as *Polizeiruf 110* (Police Call, 1971—), *30 Případů Majora Zemana* (The 30 Cases of Major Zeman, 1976—80), or *Semnadtsat Mgnoveniy Vesny* (Seventeen Moments of Spring, 1973) were major hits in the East. Such an emphasis sheds light on their continued global appeal as an “affective reference point for understanding the widespread melancholia and anxiety produced by neoliberal capitalism.”

Imre’s paper compares Cold War area spy fictions with recent takes on the genre including *The Americans* (FX, 2013—2018), *Deutschland 83* and 86 (AMC Networks and RTL, 2015—), and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Hulu, 2017—) to show how the very technological mechanisms and platforms that underpin data-based digital distribution today not only represent our structures of feeling but also actively participate in creating them. As she notes, “[contemporary spies’] struggles are magnified versions of the viewers’ sense of entanglement in digital networks that spy on and shape us.” While, in the age of Big Data, algorithmic surveillance, and publics “held together by data,” power, and control increasingly work through dehumanized networks, Imre invites us to consider agentic possibilities in the increasing awareness of digital spying in our everyday lives that comes from watching TV shows that visualize algorithmic surveillance. Furthermore, Imre calls for hybrid research approaches combining representational and logistical analysis to examine the “interfaces of algorithmic and human vision” in the age of data-based television, and clearly with CARGC Paper 15, she offers a great example of how this might be done.

The release of CARGC Paper 15 corresponds with a period of rapid change at CARGC. In August 2021, we are thrilled to welcome three new postdoctoral fellows: Woori Han, Ali Karimi, and Ayesha Omer. Woori Han will be jointly appointed by CARGC and the Center on Digital Culture and Society (CDCS) at Annenberg, both currently directed by Guobin Yang.
August will also mark the departures of both myself and of Marina Krikorian, who has served as CARGC’s Project Coordinator since 2013, contributing to the workings and growth of the center in numerous and countless ways. CARGC would not be the dynamic, globally recognized center that it has grown to be without her! The Annenberg School for Communication has confirmed its strong commitment to Global Communication Studies and is currently searching for two new faculty hires in this field. Once appointed, they will lead the center. In the meantime, Guobin Yang will continue as Interim Director. We are excited for the program of book talks, colloquia, and symposium we have confirmed for the 2021-2022 academic year on topics as diverse as media technologies and urban spaces in Beirut, trauma and global media cultures, African social media, the coloniality of climate in the Caribbean, and technological mediations and sovereignty in the indigenous borderlands of Pakistan. Stay tuned!
Secrets Without Agents: From Big Brother to Big Data

INTRODUCTION

Spies were the quintessential agents of Cold War popular media, both by profession as fictional representatives of powerful intelligence agencies and in their allegorical role as superhero-like liaisons in the international diplomacy between the two superpowers. Descended from Mata Hari and other master spies of World War I, James Bond and his many heroic, crafty, campy, or melancholic brothers and sisters who populated Cold War cinematic and literary spy fiction skillfully traversed the Iron Curtain, reassuring their viewing publics of the triumph of the good side or at least of the moral superiority of their own nations. It is no surprise that the spy genre enjoyed its heyday in the 1950s-60s, at the height of Cold War hostilities, and declined in its classic form with the thawing and eventual demise of the Cold War.1

TV and movie spies have made a remarkable international comeback since the early 2010s. Many of these recent series and feature films draw on the Cold War for historical parallels, antecedents, or representational elements. The Cold War as a thematic background to spying has been revived in blockbusters such as Atomic Blonde (Leitch 2017), Red Sparrow (Lawrence 2018), The Spy Who Dumped Me (Fogel 2018), and Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy (Alfredson 2011); and in popular television dramas such as The Americans (FX 2013–2018), Counterpart (Starz Network 2017–), Comrade Detective (Amazon 2017–), Homeland (Showtime 2011–), The Handmaid’s Tale (Hulu 2017–), A Very Secret Service (Arte 2015), Deutschland 83 and 86 (AMC Networks and RTL 2015–), 1983 (Netflix 2018–), Secret City (Netflix 2016–), The Spy (Netflix 2019–) and others.

What is obvious at first glimpse is that most of these recent products employ familiar nostalgic Cold War aesthetic and narrative elements to convey a decidedly contemporary sense of ambiguity, allegory, and dystopia that is associated with the global crisis of neoliberal markets, the erosion of trust in democratic institutions (and, indeed, in the value of “truth”), as well as the emergence of autocratic regimes worldwide. I want to probe this association further and ask why and how the memory of the Cold War is resurrected through its favored genre to lend a representative platform to current, globally shared structures of feeling. On the one hand, I expect that the implied historical parallels yield a contemporary reevaluation of the Cold War as much more complex and more thoroughly networked among national and other agents than the triumphant Western narrative of two warring empires has long suggested. On the other hand, I also expect that the comparison between Cold War and contemporary manifestations of spies and spying, particularly in

1 One of the best of the many histories of the relationship between the Cold War and the spy genre in American television is Kackman 2005.
television, will guide us to understand significant transformations in the nature, effects, and experience of surveillance. This transformation involves the global political and affective impact of populism and authoritarianism, stark economic inequality, widespread digital state and corporate surveillance, a conservative backlash against the rights of women, minorities and immigrants, the decline of democratic institutions, and the impact of fake news delivered by algorithms.

But equally important, the comparison between Cold War and contemporary spy TV turns the spotlight on a radical transformation of technological and media networks themselves, from nation-based broadcast networks to streaming and content-provider platforms that actively facilitate a more widespread, insidious, and inescapable sense of surveillance. In particular, I argue that there is a synergy between the structures of broadcast television and Cold War representations of spying on the one side, and contemporary, digital, subscription video on demand (SVOD) television and the spying and surveillance-related content offered by streaming services on the other. During the Cold War, which coincided almost exactly with the broadcast era, particularly in Europe, television was largely under the control and regulation of nation-states and networked internationally by broadcast institutions such as the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), International Radio and Television Organisation (OIRT), and International Telecommunication Union (ITU). As the editors of a recent book on European broadcasting during the Cold War put it, these organizations “functioned as crucial gateways for transnational interaction, both on the technical and juridical level as well as on the level of intercultural communication,” and acted as mediators and agents of cultural and political change (Badenoch, Fickers, and Henrich-Franke 2013, 17). The central role of these international institutions has significantly declined since the end of national broadcast monopolies and the dominance of linear, over-the-air broadcasting.

Of course, a proper comparison between Cold War and contemporary manifestations of the spy genre would require a much more extensive study. In this CARGC Paper, I channel this comparison through the more specific question of how recent spy-related media content revisits and revises the received, Western-centric history of the Cold War. Accordingly, my emphasis falls on the far less known socialist versions of the spy drama, which already imply a critical revisionist perspective that offsets the dominant view of the Cold War. Juxtaposing these with representations to the popular Western repertoire of the genre foregrounds how and why the Cold War remains an indispensable historical, philosophical, and affective reference point for understanding the widespread melancholia and anxiety produced by neoliberal capitalism.

I compare the significance of spying in these programs—which were produced by national broadcasters and circulated within international broadcast networks that had control and regulation over the production, marketing, and distribution of content—with current, globally traveling spying-related content. The latter emerges from a media industry whose primary actors have shifted from national industries and international organizations with more or less visible, transparent, embodied, human agents at their heads to integrated
technological and media companies whose digitally networked operations are increasingly underscored by big-data-based content production and consumer surveillance. Netflix, most prominently, functions as a surveillance empire that promises a great deal of individual agency grounded in infinite choices. Yet each choice leaves a digital trace of information that allows the company’s algorithmic gaze to capture and ultimately shape our images in ways that leave us in a state of anxiety over loss of control. This state of disembodied paranoia over ubiquitous, inescapable surveillance is, in turn, reproduced as represented content in a large number of contemporary television dramas distributed by streaming platforms. I end by underscoring the importance of recognizing this feedback loop between spying as content and technology and thinking seriously about how to turn it into creative methods of understanding and pedagogies of interruption.

COLD WAR TV SPIES

Beyond the enduring prototype of James Bond, fictional TV series that revolved around spying were a universally loved genre of the Cold War. This was a loose generic bag that mixed detective and spy dramas, historical adventure shows, and comedy; the shows traveled widely and were also adapted to produce local variants. In fact, as Jonathan Bignell (2010) shows, they could be seen as transnational formats before formats were officially codified as such. Bignell examines the interchange between Hollywood and the British Elstree Studios, which swapped a number of long-running detective and adventure drama serials in the 1960s and 70s, including Rawhide and Gunsmoke; crime dramas such as 77 Sunset Strip and M Squad; and spy series such as The Man from UNCLE, I Spy, and Mission Impossible. British companies ABC and ITC sold their own similar series back to the US. The Saint, the first one-hour British spy series popular on the US market, along with The Avengers, used British vocabulary, costume, and décor but their storylines were similar to those of American spy shows (Bignell 2010, 56).

This international genre family blended elements of crime, espionage, and costume adventure. It developed a “distinctive spatial aesthetic that is a national and international hybrid” (Bignell, 55). Bignell calls such shows’ generic style “telefantasy.” Narratively, the British programs tended to feature international adventurers and spies who traverse, police, and manage the bipolar spatial organization of the Cold War. Politically, they were about a world system that needed to be stabilized and controlled by elite nations (Britain and other major European countries) and their institutional representatives, working together with the US. The hybrid genre also prefigured a cross-fertilization between TV and film technology that is now a routine aspect of media convergence.

These “telefantasy” hits were also popular in the east. They translated well into the dualistic worldview of socialism, which allowed little ambivalence between (male) heroism and cowardice. The Saint and The Adventures of Robin Hood were wildly popular events on socialist
screens. The NBC crime show *Columbo* (1971–2003) was sold to forty-four countries and swept Eastern European nations in the 1970s and 80s, when the atmosphere in the east and west of Europe became more welcoming to American imports. West German police dramas also remained popular in Eastern Europe throughout the socialist period. *Derrick* (1974–1998), *Tatort* (*Crime Scene*, 1970–), and their kin were a good fit for the authoritative ethos of socialist TV by virtue of their older, more respectable, or authoritative detectives, and their more subdued, dialogue-based styles.

But socialist TV industries also produced their own homegrown spy and crime dramas. East German television was under particular pressure to answer the competition presented by West German series, which most households of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were able to receive. One of the GDR’s most successful responses was *Polizeiruf 110* (*Police Call*, 1971–), a detective show launched in 1971 as a rival to *Tatort* (Breitenborn 2004, 394). It was later picked up by ARD and was so popular that it survived the GDR’s demise. The show’s longevity is due to the balance it struck between telefantasy, or the fictionalization and dramatization of crimes, and the pedagogical drive and reality-based aesthetic at the center of socialist TV’s ethos. Unlike the West German *Tatort*, which focused on the protagonists’ private lives, *Polizeiruf* foregrounded and exalted the shared public investment in police activities addressing frequent crimes such as fraud, theft, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, child abuse, rape, and domestic violence. The scripts were keen to model appropriate socialist behaviors and reject inappropriate ones. As the socialist order declined, *Polizeiruf* also shifted towards more serious crimes, the psychological motivations of the people involved, and a more sensationalized presentation—essentially replicating *Tatort*’s aesthetic and moral universe. Post-unification episodes only differ from *Tatort* in their preference for former East German settings. *Polizeiruf 110* was a prime example of how socialist television tried to navigate between the educational imperative that it had to privilege, the ideological expectation to support the authority of socialist parties, and viewers’ yearning for telefantasy.

The Czechoslovak series *30 Případů Majora Zemana* (*The 30 Cases of Major Zeman*, 1976–80) was an especially high-profile production. Originally planned as a tribute to the thirty-year anniversary of the Czechoslovak National Security Police in 1975, it was made by Czechoslovak Television’s Army and Security Department rather than by its Department of Entertainment (which was in charge of other serials), and sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior, whose officials closely supervised the production Garai (1985). Each of the thirty episodes (as opposed to the standard seven to ten) cost a million and a half Czechoslovak crowns, almost as much as a feature film (Bílek 2013, 49). The show follows young communist Jan Zeman for thirty years of his life, from joining the police force until his retirement. Each episode is dedicated to one year of socialist history from 1945 onwards. Petr Bílek calls the serial “propagandistic entertainment” that blended the detective or

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2 Roger Moore, star of *The Saint*, visited Budapest and was interviewed on the nightly news in 1971. See Dunavölgyi 1971.
crime genre with features of the adventure drama and spy thriller (Bílek, 50). While Zeman was responsible for solving criminal cases, the episodes also emphasized his harmonious collaboration with the secret police.

Although it was never officially acknowledged, Zeman’s character was conceived as a kind of socialist James Bond. Bílek claims that this influence was mediated by other socialist serials that carried the impact of James Bond more explicitly, such as the Polish serial *Stawka większa niż życie* (More than a Life at Stake, 1967–8). The “Polish James Bond” of that show, Hans Kloss, is a double agent during the war—a Pole captured by Soviet intelligence, who impersonates a German spy and pretends to work for the Nazi Abwehr. The question of for whom Kloss ultimately worked was left obscure, other than that he was serving the socialist cause (Bílek, 52).

Kloss’s persona, in turn, evokes the legendary Max Otto von Stierlitz, the spy hero of the Soviet serial *Semnadtsat mgnoveniy vesny* (Seventeen Moments of Spring, 1973), another important influence on Major Zeman. Stierlitz is a double agent, a Soviet spy originally named Maxim Maximovich Isaev, who operates in Nazi Germany to gather intelligence on secret negotiations between Nazi leaders and Western allies (Bílek, 52). This twelve-episode drama, created by Tatiana Lioznova at the Gorky Studio for Children’s and Youth Films, was one of the first attempts by Soviet Central Television to use the miniserial format to create an ideologically manageable hybrid between propaganda content (too heavy-handed in documentary and news programming) and the serial form’s “Western” pleasures. As in Major Zeman, this navigation between the two was essential for reforging the relationship between state authority and the public (see Evans 2016, 150-182).

Besides these ideological gains, Soviet television also embraced the miniserial for its economic benefits. As Christine Evans (2016) notes, Soviet cultural producers were quite willing to compromise their ideological principles to get access to foreign markets. *Seventeen Moments* proved to be an effective vehicle for reaching audiences within and beyond the bloc. Like Major Zeman and similar serials that circulated within Europe in the 1960s–70s, it mixed crime and detective drama with the spy and adventure format, and that of partisan films set in wartime. It was based on a spy novel by Iulian Semenov, which was also turned into a “genuine political film” promoted “from above,” mixing in the features and goals of a serious documentary. The miniseries adaptation was popular not simply for its fictional pleasures but also for its accidental campiness: it generated a large collection of jokes due to its extreme long takes, nostalgic and slow movements, and relentless pathos (Evans 2016, 150-182).

The hybrid global spy genre not only linked the Soviet-controlled world with the European television market, but also shifted socialist television’s didactic thrust from straightforward news and educational programming to more popular, fictional formats. The way socialist television filled this generic template varied in significant ways, however. While Major Zeman solved his thirty cases with the help of national and international intelligence and...
crime networks, showcasing the principle of collaboration, Stierlitz acted as a lone wolf with personal command over his helpers. While Zeman was a dedicated family man, Stierlitz only managed to cobble together a temporary, symbolic family during one of his missions. And in Evans’s words, *Seventeen Moments* “entirely excludes everyday life, romantic love, and family dynamics,” the essential ingredients of Czechoslovak serials, and revolves around “a kind of sexless, imperial nuclear family” (2016, 173).

Like Bond, both Zeman and Stierlitz continue to thrive in reruns and nostalgic recollections, generating countless intertextual references, parodies, and political discussions. They continue to bind together the politics of everyday life and the politics of the state.\(^3\) Importantly, in Russia, the “imperial” legacy of *Seventeen Moments* and other Soviet spy and war dramas has merged with the international Cold War legacy of the Bond-type spy figure to rebrand the stale KGB persona of Vladimir Putin himself. As a recent article summarizes, “gifted a virtually blank canvas to work on, the Kremlin propaganda machine created Project Putin to fill the void, modelling the future leader as a modern day Stierlitz, a fictional World War II spy popular in dozens of Soviet-era novels and movies.” And “the two national channels that venture into political reporting are both government-controlled. But they apply a specific Russian definition of political reporting: They show Putin as a James Bond-like hero (flying in warplanes, scuba diving and riding topless on a horse)” (Wray 2017).

**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TV SPIES**

It is hard to ignore the preponderance of spying and surveillance—frequently embedded in the thematic cluster of crime, corruption, anxiety, and paranoia—in television and popular films of the past decade. The Cold War provides ready narrative and aesthetic furnishings for addressing these themes. In some cases, the template is resurrected as a set of clichés, as in the summer comedy spoof *The Spy Who Dumped Me*, an international romp across Europe in the service of a highly unoriginal mission to deliver a flash drive to the right agent. Most of the film was shot in Budapest, a post-Cold War center of global runaway production, whose versatile settings have provided a heavily tax-incentivized backdrop to more expensive urban locations for a number of Cold War-inspired recent spy and science fiction productions.\(^4\) As a spy spoof, the film unabashedly enlists double and triple crossings, misunderstandings, hints of romance, car chases, violent battles, cartoonish antagonists such as a Russian Olympic Gymnast-turned-soulless-torturer and protagonists such as a

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\(^3\) This is particularly relevant in the case of Vladimir Putin’s reliance on socialist television in boosting Russian imperial nationalism.

handsome British spy working for the good agency. It also sprinkles cosmetic changes on top of the formula, such as two bumbling women BFFs who become accidental spies, as well as extended, graphic, and gratuitous scenes of violence.

These two ingredients, extreme violence and the replacement of dashing male heroes with gorgeous female ones, are recurring, superficial ways to update the spy genre. They are present in *Red Sparrow* (Francis Lawrence 2017), featuring Jennifer Lawrence as a Russian spy who is trained to use seduction to get information (and which was also mostly shot in Budapest), and in the more suspenseful 2017 action thriller *Atomic Blonde*, directed by John Leitch—a vehicle for an icy-cool Charlie Theron coming off a similarly eroticized and fierce persona in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Theron literally emerges from an ice bath at the film’s outset, recharged and ready for action as an MI6 agent dispatched to Berlin on the eve of the Wall’s collapse to recover a microfilm and save the world. The recreation of 1988 Berlin is as stylized as Theron’s outfits, stilettos, and manicure, and as choreographed as the violence she unleashes in prolonged fights against impossible odds, against a soundtrack dripping with nostalgia, featuring Queen, David Bowie, George Michael, and, of course, Nena’s “99 Red Balloons.”

Similar to other filmic fictions that capitalize on a revival of Cold War nostalgia triggered by a serious reckoning with postwar history amidst the reemergence of global populism and authoritarianism, *Atomic Blonde* is set against a familiar superpower arrangement in which spies working for the Soviet Union, the US, and Western Europe (Britain) act as the chief agents. This attempt to recall the ghost of the Cold War from the last minutes before it expired, expressed in self-reflexive aestheticization and through a burnt-out, cynical agent based in Berlin (played by James McAvoy), strikes one as a perhaps unintentionally pure deployment of nostalgia in its original sense as a longing for a home that never was. The film evokes not so much the Cold War but its cinematically encoded memory, sound, and feel, thereby acknowledging that the Cold War of the movies was, to begin with, primarily an aesthetic construction. This, in turn, is all we are left with now that the Cold War has lost its power to provide a rational epistemological roadmap for the future.

The marketability of Cold War spy-show settings has also been recognized by television executives in a somewhat different set of productions, which self-consciously hover between homage and parody. The French series *A Very Secret Service* (2015-17), originally produced for Arte and released in the US as a Netflix original, is a workplace comedy set in 1960 in a secret intelligence agency. While there is some light, humorous self-criticism targeting blatant office sexism as well French nationalism and xenophobia (manifest in the agency’s attitudes towards former colonies), much of the plot revolves around office intrigue and romance, which dwarfs the importance of the various intelligence missions.

The Amazon Prime original *Comrade Detective* (2017) is another twist on the reflexive-nostalgic approach to the Cold War. It merges the time-worn buddy cop genre with executive producer Channing Tatum’s idea of creating a simulation of a 1980s Romanian
propaganda-fiction series. The show was inspired by writer-creator duo Brian Gatewood and Alessandro Tanaka’s discovery of late-Soviet propaganda television and—wait for it—The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman and Polizeiruf 110. The resulting fake Romanian propaganda series—allegedly lost, then found and restored—was shot in Bucharest featuring Romanian actors, then dubbed into English by American A-listers, underscoring the Cold War’s resurgent popularity as a theme. Comrade Detective is an innovative attempt at historical revision in that it intends to draw parallels between (anti-communist) propaganda in the US and anti-capitalist propaganda in an Eastern bloc represented by Romania. However, the attempt remains thwarted because the show remains lodged in Western perspectives on the Cold War and presents [its idea of] Eastern propaganda in a sweeping and exaggerated fashion. For instance, the second episode of its single season centers on Romanians’ inability to understand the point of the board game Monopoly that they come across in a confiscated car, since they have no idea what individual property means. This casts communist propaganda as something by definition less sophisticated and more heavy-handed, but also highly effective, mapped onto an even more retrograde hierarchy between the enlightened civilizing West and “primitive” natives not unlike Dracula—another, older Western invention planted into a mystical Romania.5

Much more fruitful for our investigative purposes are contemporary television dramas that “raise the curtain” of the Cold War, to borrow from one of the recent books that set out to expose “the many forms of interaction and cooperation between the two ‘blocs’, demonstrating that earlier concepts and histories of the Cold War reflected ideological presuppositions rather than historical reality” (Badenoch, Fickers and Henrich-Franke 2013, 11). These series take on spying as a mode of reordering the contemporary world; as a way of seeing, an epistemological matrix, and a representation of a major, global affective condition. While most of these programs draw on the Cold War as a representational resource, they also return to it to create a widely accessible historical template. Against this, they conceptualize and assess the universal threat of surveillance and power inequality that most of the world’s inhabitants find themselves facing today, in the wake of a major shift to right-wing populism, propaganda, and inescapable surveillance that is enabled, if not controlled, by an entirely new set of social networks powered by digital technology.

The Cold War networks of spying were embodied by swell, desirable, or, in the East, at least witty or smart male agents who represented powerful nation-states in a good-versus-evil battle (or their parodic doubles). Conversely, the spies in these recent allegorical dramas about surveillance have good hunches but routinely turn out to be tragically underinformed, trying to understand and battle forces whose agencies and power they misrecognize and underestimate. They find themselves embroiled in networks that are almost supernaturally

5 To compound the blunder, the show ignores the fact that socialist countries placed a great deal of emphasis on cultivating the pedagogy of persuasion through playful and enjoyable forms of socialization, including, yes, socialist versions of Monopoly, a board game that trains players to navigate a state-controlled economy in a competitive fashion.
Inscrutable. These networks no longer map onto nation-states. They are transnational, involving political representatives, corporate executives, social media influencers, grassroots organizers, lone operators, various representatives of the media and, most menacingly, rogue bots and autonomous data. Quality dramas made or carried by transnational streamers have become synonymous with a formula that mixes the spy, political, sci-fi, and crime drama genres—a blend that has resonated well with a global population united by Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, Hulu and others, but that also carries local inflections that specifically address particular national or regional populations.

*The Americans*, cable network FX’s popular and universally acclaimed spy drama (2013–18) created by former CIA officer Joe Weisberg and carried by Amazon Prime, follows a married couple of Russian spies who pose as ordinary Americans raising two children in a Washington, DC suburb in the early 1980s. The very situation of Russians successfully passing as a pair of likable Americans, under the nose of their CIA-agent neighbor, muddles the Cold War’s foundational construct of two essentially incompatible cultures, peoples, and value systems. And much of the suspenseful series’ dramatic depth comes from Elizabeth and Philip’s moral and emotional ambivalence about carrying out missions grounded in the assumption of a relentless and dogmatic battle between two countries. This ambivalence escalates to the point at which, by the sixth and final season, Philip retires from his spy work to devote himself to his former front job as a travel agent and Elizabeth disobeys her order to assassinate a reform-friendly pro-Gorbachev envoy, allowing the series to wrap up along with the Soviet Union and the Cold War.

The sci-fi “alternative history” thriller *Counterpart*, created for American cable network Starz (2017–18), was filmed in Berlin, where the plot is set in the not-too-distant future. The show’s premise is that East German scientists accidentally opened a portal to a parallel reality in 1987, and thus everything and everyone has a counterpart. Agent Howard Silk, living a Kafkaesque life of routine and predictability working for a UN agency, gets a visit from alternate Berlin by his doppelgänger (both played by J.K. Simmons), who is much closer to the archetype of the confident, resourceful, smooth-talking spy than our humble Howard. The ensuing crossings between the two worlds evoke the Cold War’s good-evil binary only to question its usefulness as a way of navigating history in light of the present and of prospects for the future.

It is no coincidence that the doppelgänger motif of double or multiple identities and lives, which crystallizes in the spy figure (see *The Americans*), has proliferated in recent popular American TV and film, from *The Leftovers, The Deuce, Fargo*, and *The Good Place* through *Logan* and *Alien: Covenant, Twin Peaks* and, of course, *Us*. Some critics link this multiplying of identities and places to the surrealism and absurdity of a political reality that fundamentally undermines the moral compass of a good-evil dynamic (see Epstein 2018), arguing that
“the doppelgänger trend seems perfectly right for a political moment when, on a daily basis, it feels appropriate to question whether our eyes are actually seeing what they’re seeing” (Chaney 2017, 1).

The divided city of Berlin, a microcosm of the global Cold War divide within a contained and manageable allegorical space, is also a recurrent element in recent TV, recurring in the popular drama series Deutschland 83, where East German border guard Martin Rauch is blackmailed into moving to the West to spy on military operations in the titular year. Another hapless, accidental hero, Martin finds himself in a key position to prevent war between East and West. The follow-up season, Deutschland 86, expands the show’s Cold War historical purview beyond Europe, placing Martin in the midst of an international arms deal in South Africa. Deutschland 89 is in preparation.

Netflix also recruited venerable Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland, who had previously worked on the Czech HBO original political-historical miniseries Burning Bush, to direct the first Polish Netflix original. Simply titled 1983, and thus joining a growing list of original drama productions evoking the late Cold War, this is yet another dystopian alternative history series—set not in the 1980s but in 2003, in a Poland isolated from the rest of the world (where the Iron Curtain has fallen), and where communist authoritarianism has remained frozen since 1983. While not nearly as seamless and successful a blend between Netflix’s traveling quality aesthetic and local contributions as Deutschland 83, and not as effective at deploying the dystopian “isolation” theme as The Handmaid’s Tale, it is clearly an allegory for Poland’s ruling Law and Justice Party’s (PiS) attempts at nationalistic ideological isolation, for whom the power of (online) propaganda insulates from reality.

To underscore the scale and impact of the phenomenon, let me briefly mention some other versions of the locally-produced, globally-streaming versions of the quality spy/conspiracy crime drama: the Australian Netflix series Secret City (originally on Foxtel’s channel Showcase, where it premiered in 2016 followed by its Netflix release in 2018), is set in the capital city of Canberra and features investigative journalist Harriet Dunkley, who is trying to uncover a vast, international military conspiracy that involves the Australian political leadership’s role in the midst of heightening tension between China and America. Harriet resembles that other tireless lone woman with no life outside of her missions to uncover conspiracy, CIA agent Carrie Mathison in the Showtime spy drama Homeland, the American adaptation of the Israeli original Prisoners of War. Harriet also evokes the heroine of The Handmaid’s Tale, the Hulu original adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s 1984 novel, set in yet another dystopian future, featuring yet another situation of a self-enclosed, artificially isolated totalitarianism reinforced through patriarchal oppression, of which the titular heroine June Osborne/Offred is desperate to break free.
We might find these shows in the recommendation lists of streaming platforms in the vicinity of the Nordic Noir crime/conspiracy drama *Mammon*, originally produced for Norwegian public broadcaster NRK 1 (2014, 2016). The show features the increasingly desperate attempts of an investigative journalist to expose corruption in a company run by his brother. *Mammon* was adapted by HBO for its Czech and Polish versions, also featuring journalists in a hopeless struggle to expose a tangle of corrupt business arrangements among financial elites whose alliance goes back to the immediate post-Wall years of the early 1990s, and who are also in bed with law enforcement and legislation. HBO Europe’s first ever co-production, with the German pay TV channel TNT Serie, a Time Warner subsidiary like HBO itself, is entitled *Hackerville* (2018). Co-created by Jörg Winger and Ralph Martin, who were also behind Amazon Prime’s *Deutschland 83* and *Deutschland 86*, *Hackerville’s* six episodes (so far) revolve around spying as a theme that draws into its narrative and historical arc contemporary cybercrime based in Romania and Cold War surveillance by the Securitate. The series sends Romanian-born German cyber-cop Lisa Metz from Frankfurt back to her birthplace of Timisoara to uncover a hacking operation. Timisoara stands in for the city of Romnicu Vâlcea, actually nicknamed “Hackerville,” where a concentration of sophisticated cybercrime created a flourishing economy in the 1990s. In the course of her investigation, Lisa uncovers her own family history, including her own father’s shady involvement with the secret police during late communism.

This is just a small sample of the international array of quality dramas that feature contemporary descendants of Cold War spies and detectives: rather than suave superheros or their bumbling parodic doubles, contemporary spies tend to be isolated truth-seekers of great instinct, stubborn determination, and with limited support, who find themselves up against conspiracies and insurmountable, unforeseen, and often invisible opponents. The spies, journalists and other truth-seekers of recent shows don’t necessarily get the job done for us. Instead, they become increasingly mired in folds of conspiracy, which lessens their knowledge and weakens their authority. Their struggles are magnified versions of the viewers’ sense of entanglement in digital networks that spy on and shape us.

**AGENTS WITHOUT AGENCY?**

Why does the formula of the Cold War-inflected traveling quality drama about digital surveillance, international corruption, conspiracy, and crime appeal so broadly around the world? One reason is certainly the global threat of creeping authoritarianism, right-wing nationalism and isolationism, and their attendant xenophobia, racism, and patriarchal control—themselves responses to the failure of free-market capitalism, which the demise of communism unleashed and subsequent global crises (most prominently the 2008 recession) have deepened. In other words, while memories and images of the Cold War provide a template for representing these structures of feeling, the current, global spread of anxiety
is the product of unbridled, digitally enhanced capitalism. In turn, this calls for a historical revision of our entire understanding of the Cold War and for critical approaches that are not limited to reading representations.

We are clearly long past the immediate post-Cold War optimism about the digital revolution’s potential to lend consumers agency through the promise of interactivity, picking up the mantle of revolution after socialism had run out of steam. Instead, in the twenty-first century, the Internet and Big Data seem to have grown into untraceable, mysterious empires that keep people in their own digital enclosures—a term Mark Andrejevic uses in his influential book *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* to describe Google’s extension of free Internet to San Francisco in 2006 in exchange for tracking and mining users’ digital footprints (Andrejevic 2007, 1). Rather than government intelligence agencies led by human spies, digital networks work through dehumanized, depersonalized algorithmic apparatuses that may be deployed by Russian bots posing as citizens of other countries, Silicon Valley tech giants, or, most important to this argument, the very media companies that have consolidated control over the streaming revolution that, they claim, finally extends the freedom of access and abundance to consumers.

As a “pioneer straddling the intersection where Big Data and entertainment media intersect,” Netflix generally stands as shorthand for the content-provider/streaming platform companies that have been vying for domination over media markets in recent years (Leonard 2013). In a recent *Saturday Night Live* mock commercial, Netflix is likened to an all-encompassing empire with limitless funds to invest in new content: “We’re spending billions of dollars in making every show in the world. Our goal is the endless scroll,” announces the sensationalizing male ad voice over an image of the spinning globe imprinted with the familiar Netflix catalogue. “Even we haven’t seen them all,” the voice-over adds, sending up Netflix’s famous algorithm-based model of developing new shows based on the consumer data collected through interaction with the catalogue (*Saturday Night Live* 2018).

Netflix famously disrupted television’s traditional content development and marketing model when it remade the 1990s BBC series *House of Cards* following the recommendations of a proprietary “collaborative filtering” algorithm that analyzed trillions of Netflix data points, using viewer ratings, history, and behavior related to content that already existed on the service (Havens 2014). The algorithm suggested, among other things, a concentrated viewer interest in surveillance-themed drama (Bellanova and González-Fuster 2018, 2–3). In other words, in an eerie feedback loop, Netflix gives us content that represents our reality of algorithmic surveillance by deploying the very algorithmic surveillance that increasingly envelops and shapes our lives and identities in the first place. Far from being a neutral platform of infinite choices available to autonomous consumer agents, Netflix creates publics held together by data: they are “streamed-to,” “data-driven,” “data-drawn” publics “that are mobilised for, and disciplined into, sustained personal data production,” into “data-breeding publics” (Bellanova and González-Fuster 2018, 19). As Rocco Bellanova and
Gloria González-Fuster write, “every move our fingers make on the platform is a trace for an archive about users’ behaviours, and these data, once properly mined, will ‘feed back’ into what we (and others) will be suggested to watch” (2018, 5).

Are Netflix and its peer streaming companies even more insidious versions of Big Brother, the allegory of the authoritarian state associated with communism? Dan McQuillan (2016) usefully compares Orwell’s parable of surveillance and propaganda with what he calls “algorithmic seeing,” connecting the history of data with the histories of other audiovisual media. However, he also points out crucial differences between algorithmic seeing and Big Brother: “Whereas the power of surveillance in Orwell’s vision depended on human watching facilitated by the transparent portal of the vision screen, big data is processed into meaning by machines; specifically by datamining and machine learning algorithms (2016, 2).” While big data has immense potential to reveal otherwise invisible connections, its operations remain opaque by virtue of its very size: “It is not possible to directly apprehend how a machine learning algorithm has traversed the data because of the number of variables involved and the complexity of the function that the algorithm has derived to map inputs on to output (2016, 3).” Furthermore, unlike surveillance and seeing technologies associated with earlier media, the algorithmic eye is “oracular,” rather than “ocular.” That is, because big data algorithms substitute correlation for causation, or relate past observation to predicting future ones, the temporality of big data is future-oriented, predictive.

It is in the political implications of a data-based apparatus that operates through algorithmic seeing that we discover perhaps unexpected convergences between Big Brother and Big Data. McQuillan argues that algorithmic vision lends itself to authoritarianism because its actions and consequences are not legible to and thus not easily understood and challenged by traditional social actors. It evades a democratic oversight that would challenge its taken-for-granted, scientific teleology. There is a correlation between the worship of “scientific” big data and the neoliberal surveillance state’s worship of economic growth, progress, and numbers. This investment in linear progress—measurable in terms of numerical output and in the service of an unquestioned teleology—also connects the underlying rationality of late capitalist neoliberalism with that of communism’s equation of the ongoing revolution with a permanently-deferred endpoint. Both ideologies call for individuals who are devoted to constant self-improvement and readiness for competition.

Both also logically produce uncertainty, anxiety, and a loss of agency. But while communist authoritarianism asserted its control through national and international institutions headed by actual human agents who could be resisted and even overthrown, political power that justifies itself in relation to the algorithmic logic of machine learning is derived from patterns of coincidence. It is ultimately irrational, disconnected from human reasoning. The affective response to this contradiction is paranoia, a thought process driven by a sense of constant threat and anxiety—the global epidemic of neoliberalism (Wilson 2017). Big data’s algorithmic seeing encases its data-breeding publics in a performative feedback loop:
instead of discovering stable taxonomies, predictive algorithms may and do change people’s behaviors.\(^6\) Algorithm-empowered streaming services such as Netflix help perpetuate the very paranoiac sensibility that their surveillance-related content narrativizes for anxious viewers. They present in dramatized, serial form a habitus epitomized by Kafka’s *The Trial*, in Joseph K’s sado-masochistic internalization of how his surreal trial reshapes his social status and relationships. Netflix and its peers are underscored by a mode of governance that, McQuillan (2016) writes, rather than “seeing like a state,” sees “like a secret state” (6).

Beyond formal similarities, we find in the end a convergence between communist, state-led authoritarianism under human dictators and neoliberal authoritarianism underscored by big data. Although both versions are primed to produce dictators, the structure of domination is more impenetrable and insidious in case of the neoliberal surveillance society of competitive authoritarianism because its “scientific” technological base supports blind faith in the inherent progress of the market.

The assemblage of films and TV programs I have discussed relate these two forms of authoritarianism and surveillance to each other with varying levels of critical intentionality. A representational/ideological analysis suggests that these products respond to a shared need to manage the fundamental insecurity and paranoia induced by algorithmic surveillance by resurrecting agents from earlier spy drama conventions. A further, more complicated but possibly more important question concerns the double role of the very technological and economic apparatus that represents our structures of feeling but is also enabled by and actively participates in producing them. Is there perhaps any agency to be gained from recognizing Netflix’s double role, from its exposure of data-based mechanisms of surveillance through our favored narratives? Bellanova and González-Fuster take up this very question in their essay “No (Big) Data, No Fiction?” (2018). They leave some room for optimism in answering the question, arguing that algorithms may produce new kinds of user networks that are able to “think surveillance with and against Netflix, through and besides its fiction” (233). When we watch the surveillance practices depicted by a given storyline, we may understand better how we are tracked by, and trapped in, multiple public and private high-tech surveillance systems. “[W]hen we realize how Netflix actually works, we may come to finally visualize algorithmic surveillance as an ‘embodied’ practice, a perception overall too rare in many other social settings” (Bellanova and González-Fuster 2018, 233).

Perhaps the most educating object of study with which to begin to conclude this chapter would be Netflix’s documentary *The Great Hack* (2019), which its creators Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim call a “modern horror story” about Cambridge Analytica’s practices of data tracking, harvesting and targeting to help anti-democratic political causes such

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\(^6\) Predictions change the conditions for the learning of machine learning. The situation has the potential for “a machinic form of paranoiac self-justification, an algorithmic attribution bias that generates systematic errors in evaluating the reasons for observed behaviours. Under these conditions, algorithmic seeing tends towards paranoia,” (McQuillan 2016, 6).
as Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US (Dreyfuss 2019). The directors’ explicit aim was to capture algorithmic vision, the way “the algorithm sees us,” through the visual language of the documentary, in order to “help people understand our own fragility and the superstructure that exists around us, and how it’s constantly sucking and collecting your behavior” (Dreyfuss 2019).

While the film identifies Cambridge Analytica as the main villain for misusing its big data to change collective behavior, it is hard to miss the irony that SVOD streaming platforms such as Netflix, which produced the film, operate in the same way. This irony then alerts us to the need to update our approach to “spying” content produced and delivered by spying platforms. More precisely, this collision of content and platform necessitates that we fuse the textual and representational approaches that enable us to analyze older content with analysis of recent, fundamental changes in the very nature of the media. As Andrejevic, Hearn, and Kennedy (2015) write, television has shifted from broadcasting and its national and institutions to “logistical media,” “whose content is not so much narratival or representational but organizational” (40). In other words, according to Ramon Lobato (2018), “the way platforms present and filter content is fundamentally distinct from the flow of linear broadcasting. Television is acquiring—unevenly, but substantively—a database form.” Netflix and its rivals are, of course, both representational and logistical media, and this hybridity invites hybrid methodologies at the interfaces of algorithmic and human vision...
REFERENCES


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