

Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012, 167 pages

Nolwenn Mingant

**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/558>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.558

ISSN: 2259-4728

Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

Electronic reference

Nolwenn Mingant, « Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* », *InMedia* [Online], 3 | 2013, Online since 15 April 2013, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/558> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.558>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

© InMedia

Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*

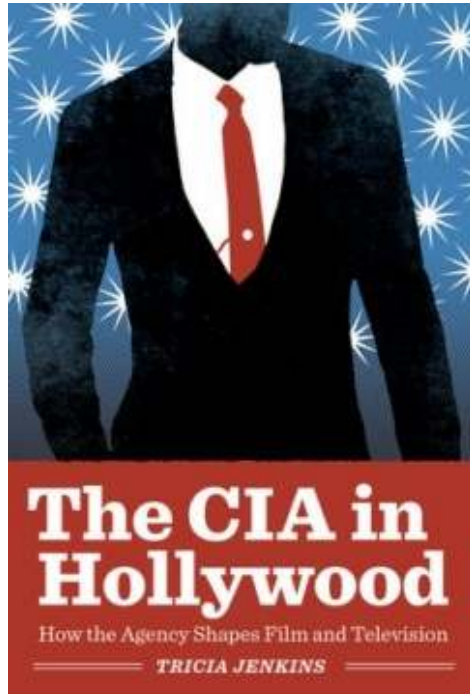
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012, 167 pages

Nolwenn Mingant

REFERENCES

Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*, Austin:
University of Texas Press, 2012, 167 pages

1 *The CIA in Hollywood*, by Tricia Jenkins, an Assistant Professor in the Film, Television, and Digital Media Department at Texas Christian University, is a brief and clear presentation of how the CIA has actively sought to collaborate with Hollywood to develop certain programs since the mid-1990s. Jenkins' aim is to reveal the 'largely hidden history of the CIA in Hollywood' and to define how 'this model of secret influence' functions (53). She covers CIA representation and involvement, from the Cold War, when it was mostly 'depicted in a very negative light,' (133) to the current post-9/11 era, as it is 'trying to circulate whitewashed images of itself through popular media.' (137)



2 Chapter 1 and 2 explore the sources of the CIA's decision to collaborate with Hollywood from the mid-1990s onwards. The official reason is a desire to counter its predominantly negative representation in Hollywood programs. Indeed Chapter 1 summarizes this image by showing how CIA agents have traditionally been depicted as assassins, rogues operatives, unprotected by their hierarchy, morally bankrupt, and/or ineffective and buffoonish. Jenkins insists however that other factors were equally if not more decisive: 'the desire to reassure Americans about the need for intelligence in a post-Cold War world, to counter congressional accusations that the CIA had grown too secretive, and to conduct damage control in the wake of the Aldrich Ames case' (32). This led to the creation of an entertainment liaison position in 1996. Chapters 3 and 4 offer detailed presentations of the way Hollywood and the CIA have collaborated since the mid-1990s. Five 'CIA-assisted texts' are scrutinized: television film *In the Company of Spies* (T. Matheson, 1999, Showtime), television series *The Agency* (M.F. Beckner, 2001-2003, CBS) and *Alias* (J.J. Abrams, 2001-2006, Touchstone Television), as well as two feature films: *The Recruit* (R. Donaldson, 2003, Touchstone Pictures) and *The Sum of all Fears* (P.A. Robinson, 2002, Paramount Pictures). These chapters explore the CIA's motives for working with Hollywood, as well as the nature of the relationship. The films themselves are explored as 'texts,' thematically, not aesthetically. Chapters 5 and 6 move towards a more critical tone as Jenkins raises problematic issues concerning CIA involvement in Hollywood. Chapter 5 argues that 'the CIA's refusal to support all filmmakers seeking its assistance constitutes a violation of the First Amendment's right to free speech' (12). It also explores issues of propaganda. Chapter 6 develops concepts of realism and accuracy, by contrasting 'CIA-assisted texts' to texts based on the advice of ex-CIA agents.

3 As can be expected, one of the major problems encountered by Jenkins was the lack of sources. Indeed 'CIA public affairs officers are rarely credited in sources like the Internet Movie Database or on a program's scrolling credits' (52). Confronted with the issue of secrecy surrounding CIA activities, Jenkins did find variegated sources to

support her argumentation. CIA history books provide her with general information, CIA and other official document with unclassified data. She also relies heavily on small facts casually reported by the press –such as talent's visits of CIA headquarters, which she organizes into a meaningful narrative. Varied press sources are called upon, from trade magazine *Variety* to general titles such as the *Washington Post* to internal CIA magazine *What's New at CIA*. In the absence of fully-fledge academic research on the topic, she relies on a few articles from various journals such as *World Policy Journal* or *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. More theoretical books on propaganda and media manipulation, such as Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (2002) or Randal's *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* (2002), also inform her analysis. In order to compensate for the lack of sources, Jenkins resorts to two interesting methodologies. The first one is to interview insiders, both from the CIA and from Hollywood. Jenkins uses these sources fully, while maintaining the necessary analytical distance. She emphasizes the fact that 'the history of the CIA in Hollywood is, at present, more of a verbal history than a written one.'³ The second methodological technique is to draw parallels with two other official bodies for whom academic research does exist : the FBI (38) and the Pentagon (48, 97). When making comparisons with the Pentagon, for example, she heavily relies on Robb's *Operation Hollywood : How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (2004). This reasoning by analogy is very convincing and helps her fill the missing gaps.

- 4 The style is possibly what is least satisfying in this book. Transition sentences, probably added for the sake of clarity, tend to simply repeat, sometimes *verbatim*, the content of the chapter. One sentence even appears three times. These repetitions are unnecessary as the author's ideas are otherwise expressed very clearly. What tends to lose the reader are the many people alluded to. Although the author provides a list of CIA directors and liaison officers early on (6), this is not enough to prevent the reader from wondering, fifty pages later, who is whom. Another point to be deplored is the conciseness of the index which is thus not very useful. All in all, the book is often very descriptive, which makes it a very easy read.
- 5 The core argument of the book is the way the CIA uses Hollywood programs for its own purposes. Jenkins makes it clear that the Agency's aim is not simply to promote a better image of the agency. Hollywood programs have other – shadier – uses. In the eyes of the CIA, this positive depiction is invaluable as a recruitment tool. In 2004, the CIA even hired *Alias* star Jennifer Garner for a recruitment video. *Alias* indeed 'depicted espionage as a glamorous career' (76) and Garner's character was shown 'balancing her spy career with a personal life and graduate education' (76). But, according to Jenkins, the CIA's motives go much beyond recruitment, as Hollywood programs are also used as concrete tools in the CIA's everyday activities. Jenkins thus asserts that the television series *The Agency* was used as a 'threat-scenario workshop' (66). The CIA entertainment liaison fed the series creators with ideas that they were to develop. Scenarii explored included for example an anthrax attack on the USA and a 'growing military buildup on the border of India' (68). The use of story-telling creativity for intelligence purpose is also made clear in the development by the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative technology of 'a videogame that would allow Agency analysts to assume the role of terror-cell leaders, members and operatives in order to help the United States avert further attacks.' (67) Finally, the CIA seems to deliberately infuse Hollywood programs with 'an exaggerated vision of the Agency's capabilities,' (91) notably in technical terms. This concious overestimation is conceived as a means of

intimidation of foreign enemies. An industry liaison officer is thus reported to have suggested to *The Agency* creator Beckner to represent certain technologies, as ‘terrorists watch TV, too’ (69).

- 6 Beyond this central topic, the book offers an valuable presentation of the relationships between the CIA liaison officers and the Hollywood personnel. The development of this human, almost anthropological vision, is of great interest. Although the CIA has an official bureau liaising with Hollywood, relationships seem mostly of the casual and off-the-record sort. Chase Brandon was thus ‘selected for the position of “entertainment liaison” because he was the first cousin of Tommy Lee Jones, which meant he was able to come into the job with numerous Hollywood contacts already in place (47).’ Brandon’s job included ‘pitching ideas to writers and working directors’ (49), as well as travelling to Los Angeles ‘roughly once a month to “make the rounds” and establish new contacts’ (49). Jenkins also insists that, contrary to the Pentagon which intervenes at the production stage and exerts strong influence because it provides ‘expensive equipment’ in exchange for ‘script control’ (48), the CIA can only offer ‘access to technical consultants and to CIA headquarters for filming’ (49). Consequently, ‘Langley is most effective in influencing storylines in the preproduction stage, when it can suggest ideas as they are being crafted’ (49). The CIA influence is thus much more informal and difficult to trace. The term ‘consultant’ can for example cover a wide spectrum of involvement levels (85). Hollywood professionals themselves would not necessarily talk of collaboration, strictly speaking. *The Agency’s* Beckner for example turned to CIA officer Brandon for advice because they had developed a ‘strong friendship’ (65). In the words of Beckner: ‘Because these conversations were so casual (...), I’m not sure I would classify them as official CIA-Hollywood exchanges’ (65) Jenkins thus insists that ‘the CIA’s involvement in Hollywood is indeed shadowy and difficult to trace, especially since its interactions often take place only between two well-placed individuals, either in person or over the phone’ (69). What Jenkins leaves unclear however is why Hollywood creatives are willing to play this game. She notes that the CIA has ‘a very active’ network of people in Hollywood helping ‘in whatever way they can to give back’ (94). However, one closes the book still wondering about what Hollywood really gets out of this ‘mutally beneficial relationship’ (89).
- 7 Emphasizing the CIA’s manipulation and the casual relationship with Hollywood leads Jenkins to interrogate the ‘rhetoric of authenticity’ (102) that both partners allude to. Jenkins’ aim in this book is to counter ‘the CIA’s claim that it is invested in Hollywood only to portray accurately the Agency and to educate viewers about the CIA’s role’ (69) She does so by emphasizing the difference between realism and accuracy. While Hollywood turns to the CIA to enhance the realism of its programs (90), this collaboration does not lead to more accurate films. One example is the fact that the CIA is prone to exaggerate its ‘technical capabilities’ (91) for ‘psychological warfare’ (55) purposes. CIA-assisted texts can then be considered as visually realistic but technically inaccurate texts. Jenkins also devotes a chapter to non CIA-supported docudramas, such as *Syriana* and *The Good Shepherd* (124-125). The CIA strongly opposes such films, not simply because they convey a negative image of the Agency but more importantly because they are perceived as historically accurate by the audience and are ‘much more influential in shaping the public’s understanding of the Agency than any news article, memo, or report it may release’ (126) For the CIA, a war of image is being waged. The way Hollywood content is used domestically, as a recruitment tool, and internationally, as a ‘scare tactic’ (91), shows these texts are not ‘educational initiatives’ (97) but fully-

fledged and 'well-disguised propaganda' (84). Going one step further, Jenkins denounces the CIA attitude –supporting exclusively pro-Agency programs – and shows this to be a violation of the 'publicity and propangada laws, which forbid the government from engaging in self-aggrandizing and covert communication' (97). Although she does not directly incriminates the Hollywood partner, her book shows the ambiguity of the creative community when it comes to propaganda. On the one hand, CIA-supported films are often openly marketed as such as this enhances the realism of films (114). On the other hand, Hollywood talent maintain that they keep creative control over the programs (51) – which can be questioned as Jenkins describes practices of covert influence and self-censorship (134). Besides, they are not always keen on acknowledging collaboration, as being suspected of propaganda is usually negative for a film's image and box-office results (72). Finally, Jenkins insists on the pernicious quality of 'CIA propaganda [which] is often hard to detect by the average viewer' (78).

- 8 *The CIA in Hollywood* does have certain limits, such as the repetitions of sentences and ideas, or the lack of examination of the Hollywood point of view. It is however a very informative read and a well-documented study. One also appreciates that, although the author is clearly determined to counter the CIA's official discourse, she does not do so through a subjective and passionate pamphlet, but presents scientifically supported analyses. The book is about examining specific texts, relationships and practices, not about a larger CIA-Hollywood conspiracy theory. This will leave the reader informed and more discerning, not completely paranoid.

AUTHORS

NOLWENN MINGANT

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3