

ASHES AND DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn

The total obliteration of the war by information, propaganda, commentaries, with camera-men in the first tanks and war reporters dying heroic deaths, the mish-mash of enlightened manipulation of public opinion and oblivious activity: all this is another expression for the withering of experience, the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies. It is as if the reified, hardened, plaster-cast of events takes the place of events themselves. Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary film that has no spectators, since the least of them has his bit to do on the screen.

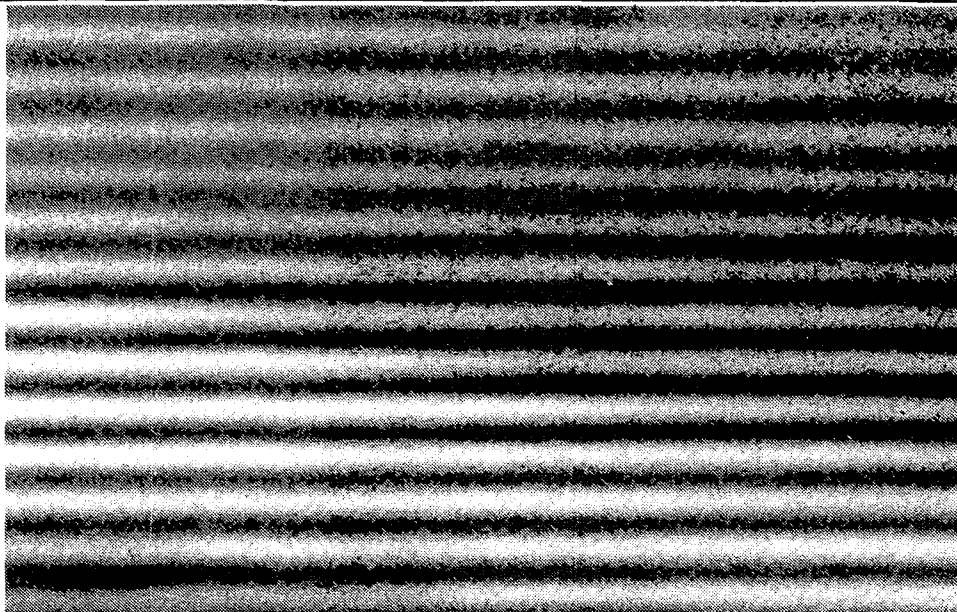
This was Theodor Adorno, writing in *Minima Moralia* about the phony war in 1939, but it seems as good a quotation as any to put at the top of a new column about the monster documentary film, played out on television and in the national press, from which none of us can escape.

Haiti, before and after

Remember Haiti, which gave way in the headlines to the Philippines, which gave way to Nicaragua, which gave way to Libya, which gave way to Chernobyl and what the types from the Atomic Energy Forum like to call a "nuclear event." Baby Doc fled, the people danced in the streets and pundits heaped praise on President Reagan for his masterly supervision of the shift to freedom in that Caribbean nation.

After a tactful pause, during which the network news teams headed for home, the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince announced on March 27 that it was supplying \$384,000 worth of riot-control equipment to the new government, to "give the Haitian army the ability to respond to internal security emergencies without having to resort to the use of clubs or infantry weapons," thus demonstrating—though no fresh proofs are needed—the humane disposition of the Reagan administration, which knew, as we shall shortly see, that heavy weapons needed to quell uppity Haitians were sent in illegally from the U.S. under the supervision of the CIA 15 years ago.

Since Haiti was now officially "free," U.S. journalists and television crews began to give the country a wide berth, just as they mostly had when it was officially a "dungeon." Journalists will seek any excuse not to go to a country. "It's the one place where Reagan managed to do the right thing," a network correspondent remarked to me with satisfaction about El Salvador, seeking to explain why he had not bothered to go there for several months. When I pointed out that the killer gangs otherwise known as the Salvadoran armed forces are rampaging through the countryside destroy-



ing all in their path, that there is great labor militancy, and that Duarte is fast losing support of his own political base, the correspondent said placidly that he was not aware of such developments, but that El Salvador seemed to be "over," so far as exciting and career-enhancing journalism was concerned.

But amazingly, the news blackout on Haiti was not impenetrable. A team from the CBS documentary show *57th Street* found its way there and on April 30 aired an excellent bit of reporting, produced by my sister-in-law Leslie Cockburn with Jane Wallace. Speaking with uncommon frankness was Butch Ashton, a U.S. businessman who made millions under Duvalier on his own account and also for U.S. firms—such as TRW and GTE—that hired him for his connections and local know-how. Having stated flatly that the Tontons Macoutes were first trained by U.S. Marines in 1961 and 1962, Ashton was confronted with the following profile of his business methods, ripely symbolic of U.S. corporate activity in the region: starting in 1975 Ashton leased land from peasants on which to grow limes for export to the U.S. When the leases expired last year and peasants asked for higher rents, Tontons Macoutes took them off to prison and tortured them until they saw the error of their ways. So, Jane Wallace asked him, did he have Tontons Macoutes on his payroll? Ashton replied with defiant ambiguity, "Never. There have been people...the mayor of the area, who happened to be a Tontons Macoute and is a leader of the area, was, in fact, on—not on the payroll, but he was on a consultant basis for security in the fields...."

But now of course the Tontons are an ancient nightmare (even though most of the hardcore 20,000 still have their weapons and none has been placed on trial), so who is keeping order in the new Haiti? To whom are those riot-control weapons going? Answer: the shock troops known as the Leopards, who were trained by James Byers

and his Miami-based firm Aerotrade, which took the job in 1971 during the U.S. ban on direct military assistance to Haiti. Byers told *57th Street* that the CIA knew all about his mission and supervised contracts for the heavy arms—.30 cal and .50 cal machine guns, 20mm rapid fire cannons—imported into Haiti at the time. "What is happening now," he said, "is that the Leopards...are taking the place of the Tontons Macoutes." The regime hasn't changed, said Honorate of the Haitian Center for Human Rights, "only Duvalier is absent." And the tactics of brutality and intimidation? "I think they are going to worsen."

Nuclear partners

I don't know why people are surprised at the Soviet Union's reluctance to give details of the disaster at Chernobyl. Stalin took 10 days to acknowledge the German invasion in 1941. The Soviets will presumably be grateful to the U.S. networks for their remarkable tact in keeping off the air as far as was possible active and articulate opponents of nuclear power. No one seemed very keen either to broadcast unwelcome calculations of the consequences upon Chernobyl and kindred communities of just one nuclear missile.

Perfect executioners

For every diamond there's a hill of ashes. "If—repeat, if—President Reagan should order another attack on Libya," said Dan Rather excitedly on April 22, "how would it compare with last week's raid?" CBS's "Defense" correspondent David Martin then gave a rapt commercial for a new object of joy and defense appropriations, courtesy of General Dynamics, in the non-nuclear Land Attack Tomahawk missile, homing in on the taxpayer at \$3 million per warhead. "Unveiling a weapon which several defense officials say 'has obvious applications to a Libyan scenario,' the Pentagon today released pictures of a submarine-launched Tomahawk cruise missile destroying an aircraft parked 400 miles away. The unmanned cruise missile arrived directly overhead and detonates with split-second timing." While Martin was talking, CBS viewers were blessed with a Defense Department film clip that, unsurprisingly, showed a missile exploding over a plane with split-second timing. That's what Defense Department film clips are for, though why CBS should use them is another question.

This item contained, in compact 60-second form, almost everything that is wrong with network news: grovelling complicity with the Reagan administration, flackery for the Pentagon, insensate ignorance. The Tomahawk is guided in its ultimate stage by "terrain correlation," which matches that landscape ahead of the missile with a stored map inside it, but when the landscape is flat and featureless like, say, Libya, there is insufficient data for matching and the missile goes astray. Final targeting is achieved by DSMAC, or digital scene matching. The missile takes a

TV picture of the designated target area that is then laid over a pre-stored photograph; when the two match, the warhead explodes. The trouble with this system, highly reminiscent of both network reporting and the workings of Ronald Reagan's brain, is that the slightest change in the landscape after the pre-stored photograph has been taken—smoke, a shift in plane positions on a tarmac, etc.—and the Tomahawk missile goes astray and explodes elsewhere with results unfortunate for anyone in the vicinity. In other words, the weapon is a dog, and thus highly esteemed by peace-loving military Keynesians who prefer expensive weapons that don't work. Not so great if you happen to be Khadafy's daughter, but who ever made an omelette without breaking eggs.

And what about the bombing raids on Tripoli and Benghazi, hailed by the Pentagon and its network accomplices as virtually perfect in execution, barring unfortunate and unforeseen impacts on civilian neighborhoods, small children, old people, animals and kindred North African impedimenta? From the military point of view (as from the political), the raid was a disaster. Of 24 F-111s leaving Britain, 13 actually managed to enter the air space over Tripoli and of these only eight managed to release their bombs, and these 90 bombs came close to only two out of the five targets. So much for the Air Force. The U.S. Navy, with two aircraft carriers carrying 90 planes each, managed to bring somewhere between 12 and 16 A-6s over the area, most of whose bombs landed nearly two miles from their targets. The rest of their 180 planes were either defending their aircraft carriers or shooting at the entirely futile SAM-5 missile sites, thus proving the truth of the proposition that an aircraft carrier, at \$5 billion (\$20 billion if you include the escorting flotilla) exists very expensively to defend itself.

This is the kind of data that David Martin and his colleagues do not seem too interested in, preferring as they do to run exciting Defense Department footage of bombs plunging through the night sky toward Khadafy's family.

Local shell game

If there's one outfit more craven than network news, it's local news. At noon, a couple of days after the Libyan bombing, about 100 students at the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan held a demonstration to protest the raid. The local NBC affiliate showed up and did interviews with the participants who explained that they did not particularly like Khadafy, but did not like reprisal bombing either. The TV team was then approached by two conservative students who asked whether they could "give the other side of the story." The NBC affiliate then interviewed these two lengthily. The five o'clock news had the main demonstrators and the two conservatives. By six o'clock, the main demonstration had disappeared, except as a crowd background to an interview with the conservatives, with the anchorman announcing that protesters at Ann Arbor had demonstrated against the bombing of Libya, "but not Khadafy's terrorism." By 11 p.m. the entire story had disappeared, to be replaced by a submissive interview with a professor on the same campus called Raymond Tanter, who used to be on Reagan's National Security Council.

But the story had a sequel. When the furious organizers of the demonstration called up to complain about their misrepresentation as catspaws of Khadafy, the TV people were arrogant, as all journalists are unless in the presence of people they deem to be more powerful than themselves. But the organizers persisted and finally won an on-air retraction. Moral: don't take the news lying down. ■

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Le Carre's flawed perfection

A Perfect Spy

By John le Carre

Knopf, 479 pp., \$18.95

By Paul Skenazy

SOME TIME BACK, JOHN LE Carre started veering away from writing novels about spying to writing novels about spies. In his Smiley-Karla trilogy in particular (*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Honourable Schoolboy*; *Smiley's People*), he wrote less of the dangers of international intrigue than about the people caught in the complex cross-fire of national policy and personal loyalty: those who spend their lives, often at the cost of their souls, peeking at each other for love of country. He got derailed from those purposes a bit with *The Little Drummer Girl*—an intricate but somewhat leaden work about Israeli-Arab conflicts—but he's back in his home territory once again in *A Perfect Spy*.

Spy is a psychological thriller in which public issues of who knows what about whom are almost entirely displaced by one individual's quite private—indeed, secretive and illicit—attempt to find out about himself for the first time in his life. Magnus Pym is the “perfect” agent of the title: a suave, engaging, brilliant man who has lived his life charming friends, lovers, wives and even himself into believing that he reserves his lies only for others. As the story opens, Pym (renamed Canterbury) arrives at a boarding house in a south Devon town. Meanwhile, his wife Mary, back in Vienna where the family is posted, awaits Jack Brotherhood, Pym's commander and friend in the Firm (and Mary's former lover), who has come to figure out why Pym has mysteriously disappeared.

From there the story moves through alternating glimpses of Brotherhood and Mary, and of Pym. As Mary and Brotherhood frantically try to reconstruct Pym's motives and actions, Pym himself sits writing a lengthy memoir, addressed by turns to his son Tom and to Brotherhood. Interview by interview, Brotherhood learns of Pym's whereabouts before he disappeared, his calls of apology to friends, his last visit with his son at school. Brotherhood argues with the American spy network, defending Pym against charges of being a double agent. He hears of Pym's clandestine love affairs, his unreported meetings with strangers, his occasional drunken lapses.

Easy deception

Pym writes of his migratory childhood, the two women who nurtured him and died young, his first spy work for Brotherhood while a peripatetic student in Bern (when he was responsible for the arrest of his crippled friend and neighbor, Axel). Behind both the disappearance and the autobiography, we learn, is the death of Rick,

Pym's notorious, unscrupulous father. When he hears of Rick's death, Pym exclaims, “I'm free,” and after the funeral he disappears. Rick is both the secret shame of Pym's life and the source of Pym's own graceful ease as a deceiver. Pym sees his whole personality arising as a reaction to Rick: his skills as a con artist, his desperate need to please everyone he meets, his selflessness in search of identity and definition from others, his desire to become a “secret mover of life's events.”

The reader see-saws back and forth between these stories, engulfed for a period in Pym's abundant memory, tense and charged

by Brotherhood's witty, threatening and confusing interrogations. Le Carre develops an extraordinarily dense portrait of post World War II England, as seen through the upper-middle-class male point of view. His control of period detail, and of the world of intrigue, is impeccable; the tone rarely slips, the invention never falters. A harsh irony undermines every aspect of British manners and pretension while a decent tone of forbearance maintains hints of the need to sustain some cultural commitment to traditional forms of propriety and common courtesy. (Low-level farce is reserved for the American spy networks.) We rush

from church services to extravagant parties, from outrageous confidence games to even more underhanded spy maneuvers. Everything seems to be noticed, everything seems to be of importance.

Sentence by sentence, *A Perfect Spy* is a near-perfect piece of writing. As a novel, however, the book collapses on itself. While the environment is convincing, most of the characters are not. Almost everyone but Pym is reduced to a monotonous one-note samba: Brotherhood to frustrated rage, Mary to a high-pitched hysteria, and so on. In Brotherhood's case, the portraiture is effective; in Mary's, it is part of that way le Carre has of creating

IN THESE TIMES MAY 14-20, 1986 13 women as non-adults, petulant creatures who live as male toys. Women who remind me of nothing so much as bad Hemingway.

The major problem of the book is the unresolved psychological confusion le Carre brings to his analysis of Pym. *Spy* is a personalization of politics, in which national issues and conflicts of ideas are reduced to private psychic needs. Pym's life is understood as the result of his unresolved childhood conflicts with Rick, which Pym the adult can only tentatively and temporarily control by adopting two alternate father-figure mentors: Jack Brotherhood, whom he ostensibly works for, and Axel, the man whom he betrays and later meets again as a Czechoslovakian agent. Rick's failed nurturing has left Pym sourceless, without a self; he has become a “shell,” a “hermit crab,” an invention of others. The secrets he gives his superiors are his gifts of love, offerings which might maintain his place in their affections. He exists only as long as he knows something someone else doesn't, but wants to; thus the perfect spy, imaged as a child seeking love from a loveless and self-aggrandizing series of fathers.

Le Carre structures his story around the Oedipal conflict between Rick and Pym. The continuing issues of Pym's dependence and conflict with superiors, and Pym's later emotional seduction by both Brotherhood and Axel, require that we accept this farfetched psychologizing. But despite the endless pages devoted to talk of Rick's life and of Pym's childhood, Rick remains a shadowy figure, whose magnetism must be accepted on faith. Pym is at once too complex and too simple a character for this kind of analysis to make sense.

Mangled contradiction

At the same time, Pym's writing voice in his memoir is compelling, and the texture of his memory binds us to the England of his youth in a moving and powerful way. The rich wealth of language and cultural allusion tell of a man embedded in his times and society; the organizing principle of the plot tells another tale, of a man whose fate is determined from his earliest days by his father's flagrant lies. And Pym as a creation is mangled by these two contradictory interpretations.

Don't, however, mistake my arguments with *Spy* for disinterest. Le Carre is a brave, ambitious writer, always overreaching his skills in order to find out just what else is possible in the thriller form. Pym's memoir is a new, self-reflective departure for him: an effort to get inside the blood of a man encouraged to develop his criminality, and to make overt parallels between the spy and the novelist. Pym's double life of secrecy, duplicity and role-playing are like the multiple personalities of the writer. Both creatures nurture an emptiness that leaves them selfless and selfish, vulnerable yet above the grime, devoted while loveless, public when most hidden. Despite the length, despite the lapses and despite the fact that le Carre's own craft has for the moment outdone his psychological penetration, his curiosity about the void at the heart of imagination opens up a whole new world worth any spy's attention.

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Nicole Farentz