

# *Das unsichtbare Visier*—A 1970s Cold War Intelligence TV Series as a Fantasy of International and Intranational Empowerment; or, How East Germany Saved the World and West Germans Too

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## Abstract

This article addresses a franchise of intelligence films in the former Communist East Germany. Under the general title *Das unsichtbare Visier*—*The Invisible Visor*—they were produced for television and very popular. In general, the Cold War East produced a rich array of its own intelligence heroes, which cannot be reduced to mere derivatives of Western models. Yet there were commonalities and interactions across Cold War divides. One of these common features that *Visier* shared with many intelligence films globally was the depiction of abroad as both an “invisible front” of dangers and temptations and an exciting realm of adventure and consumption. *Visier* could not but also be a fantasy about East German citizens encountering, withstanding, and also enjoying the dangers and temptations of the Western Cold War Other. This included their facing two peculiar challenges: a degree of international mobility unlike anything the vast majority of ordinary East Germans could experience and the West’s consumerism. *Visier* addressed both these issues through what we could describe as an essentially playful—and

dis-playful—practical cosmopolitanism. A careful look reveals *Visier* as a rich artifact of Cold War popular culture, with complex messages. The image of the heroic East German agent included a running comment of compensatory wish fulfillment. Here were ideal East German citizens doing their duty and yet also getting a fair slice of the capitalist good life abroad that most of their compatriots could not reach. They also consistently punched above their weight vicariously for East Germany as a whole. Like Britain's James Bond, these were agents of an at-best middling power doing major things in the world at large. And finally, perhaps most satisfyingly of all, they turned into gentle, benevolent guardian angels of hapless West German cousins, neatly reversing West Germany's claims of superiority.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Popular Culture, Intelligence Agents, Television, East Germany, James Bond

## Introduction

During the last century's Cold War, narratives about intelligence agents (or, simply put, spy fiction) was a booming entertainment genre in both the West and East.<sup>1</sup> This article contributes to the history of Cold War popular culture—with “popular” understood in a modern, not folkloristic or premodern sense, and “culture” in a broad, not high-culture sense—by focusing on an example of spy fiction on television.<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Cold War* was mostly a Western term and using it for its Eastern side should not “level the diverse experiences, mentalities, and practices connected to the forty-year standoff between the Eastern and the Western camp.” See Anette Vowinckel, Marcus Payk, Thomas Lindenberger, “European Cold War Culture(s)? An Introduction,” in *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*, ed. Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk, Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1.

2. My understanding of popular culture draws on multiple sources, including Adele Marie Barker, “The Culture Factory: Theorizing the Popular in the Old and New Russia,” in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Barker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jason Dittmer, *Popular Culture*,

Television has special relevance in this context because in the postwar period the rise of the fictional spy to hero status—a process that began in the nineteenth century but escalated in the second half of the twentieth century (and is continuing, for better or worse)—coincided with the emergence of

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*Geopolitics, and Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Thomas Hecken, *Theorien der Populärkultur. DreiBig Positionen von Schiller bis zu den Cultural Studies* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007); and John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997). Scholars from various disciplines have addressed the relationship between culture and the Cold War. Their contributions cannot be summarized or surveilled here. Important works include Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk, and Thomas Lindenberger, eds., *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Christopher Moran, “Ian Fleming and the Public Profile of the CIA,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15 (2013), in particular, on the place of film in Cold War culture and cultural Cold War; Kirsten Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Frederick Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006); Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*; Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Post-War Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain’s Secret Propaganda War 1948–1977* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998); Hugh Wilford, “Calling the Tune? The CIA, The British Left and the Cold War, 1945–1960,” and Richard J. Aldrich, “Putting Culture into the Cold War: The Cultural Relations Department (CRD) and British Covert Information Warfare,” both in *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe*, ed. Krabbendam Scott-Smith (London: Routledge, 2004); Peter Busch, “The ‘Vietnam Legion’: West German Psychological Warfare against East German Propaganda in the 1960s,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16 (2014); Michael David-Fox, “The Iron Curtain as Semipermeable Membrane: Origins and Demise of the Stalinist Superiority Complex,” in *Cold War Crossings. International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s–1960s*, ed. Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014); Moran, “Ian Fleming and the Public Profile of the CIA”; and Lowell H. Schwartz, *Political Warfare against the Kremlin: US and British Propaganda Policy at the Beginning of the Cold War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 211. For a challenge to the consensus view of the Cold War’s importance, stressing the limits of its influence on, in this case, American culture, see Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

traditional (predigital) television as a mass medium. The result of this conjuncture was that while we may associate spies as popular-culture icons with characters such as James Bond or Jason Bourne, who started out on book covers but who have achieved peak fame via cinema, in reality, television has played an at least equally important role in bringing spy fiction to mass audiences.

Indeed, if we turn our attention specifically to the East of the Cold War (here meaning the Soviet Union and its allies/clients in eastern and central Europe), we find that in three countries at least the single most popular piece of spy fiction was made for television: In Communist Poland and the Soviet Union the blockbuster series “*Stawka większa niż życie* (Stakes Greater than Life) and *Semnadsat Mgnovenii Vesny* (Seventeen Moments of Spring), respectively;<sup>3</sup> and in East Germany, a kind of franchise of spy thrillers under the title *Das unsichtbare Visier* (The Invisible *Visior*—hereafter *Visier*), shown between 1973 and 1979.<sup>4</sup> This article will focus on the later instalments of *Visier* after 1976.<sup>5</sup>

3. *Semnadsat Mgnovenii Vesny* (“Seventeen moments of spring”) was based on a novel, which formed part of Iulian Semionov’s series of stories about its hero, a fictitious Soviet agent usually known by his German cover name Shtirlits (or Max Otto von Stierlitz). Yet the Shtirlits that became a persistent pop-culture icon in Russia (and not only) is the one produced by Semionov (as [co]script writer), the director Tatiana Lioznova (also de facto a coscript writer), and, last but not least, the brilliant actor Viacheslav Tikhonov, functioning in essence as Shtirlits’s Sean Connery. In the case of *Stawka* and *Visier*, the films came first; stories and novels were spin-offs.

4. The period 1973 to 1979 refers to the first showings of the films. At the same time, reruns of earlier parts of *Visier* began as early as 1974 and did not end until after 1979. *Visier*’s structure, discussed in more detail later, is not easy to categorize. In official usage it was called, for instance, *eine mehrteilige Filmerzählung* (a film narrative in multiple parts), archive of the “Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (hereafter BStU) MfS ZAIG 26967: 20. In English, the concept of the franchise comes reasonably close. At least sometimes, commentators also used the term “Kundschafterserie” (as, for instance, “Depot im Skagerrak,” *Volksarmee*, no. 36, 1977, which means a series about *Kundschafter*, a euphemism for spy, discussed further.

5. In all three countries—Poland, the Soviet Union, and East Germany—there were other, sometimes very successful spy stories in the shape of novels and films (for cinema and television). But in each country, we can clearly identify one case of outstanding popularity; namely, *Stawka*, *Vesny*, and *Visier*, respectively.

## *Das unsichtbare Visier* (The Invisible Visor), Phase 2

A separate discussion of only this second phase makes sense because the whole of *Visier* consisted of two related but substantially different parts: the first nine films, shown between 1973 and 1976, featured a single hero agent called Achim Detjen (his cover identity), played by the East German (and later international) star Armin Mueller-Stahl.<sup>6</sup> After his departure (due to a combination of his own dissatisfaction and political disfavor), a second set of seven films, released between 1977 and 1979 under the same title, but in fact quite different, showed a team of agents.

While this article is about the second, post-Mueller-Stahl, team-based version, it occasionally refers to the first, single-hero iteration, too, as well as to *Visier* as a whole, encompassing its first and second phase. I have adopted a shorthand, which, readers should keep in mind, has not been used officially or generally; it is merely a device for making this text easier to read: When referring to the single-agent films turning on Achim Detjen's adventures alone—*Visier I*; for only the second, team-based version—*Visier II*; and for *Visier I* and *II* together—simply *Visier*.

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6. Mueller-Stahl did not “defect,” and *Visier* did not end after he stopped playing the main character (as sometimes stated in the literature). Beyond the team version of the franchise, there was also a later spin-off, “Fire Dragon” (Feuerdrachen) and an unrealized plan for a second spin-off under the title “Jungle of Missiles” (Raketenschungel). See Sebastian Haller, “Imaginations of Insecurity: Representations of the State Security Service in East German Television in the Late 1960s and 1970s,” in *Socialist Imaginations Utopias, Myths, and the Masses*, ed. Jakub Beneš, Stefan Arvidsson, and Anja Kirsch (London: Routledge, 2018), 206. The first films, with Mueller-Stahl as key protagonist, are the subject of my discussion of *Visier* in a book to come out soon. On *Visier* and other East German intelligence films, see also Haller, “Imaginations of Insecurity”; Haller, “‘Diesem Film liegen Tatsachen zugrunde . . .’: The Narrative of Antifascism and Its Appropriation in the East German Espionage Series ‘Das unsichtbare Visier (1973–1979),’” *History of Communism in Europe* 5 (2014); Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, “Espionage and the Cold War in DEFA Films: Double Agents in *For Eyes Only* and *Chiffriert an Chef—Ausfall Nr. 5*,” in *Cold War Spy Stories from Eastern Europe*, ed. Valentina Glajar, Alison Lewis, and Corina I. Petrescu (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

*Visier*, it should be made explicit, has no claim as a work of film art. At its best, it was solidly made television entertainment with a political message, which was sometimes fairly unobtrusive and implicit (especially in *Visier I*) and sometimes crudely blunt and preachy (in particular in *Visier II*) but always pervasive. Like most films about secret agents everywhere, *Visier* was anything but realistic.

Yet in a franchise that lasted seven years and featured sixteen individual films (which usually formed clusters of two or three with one story arc), there were bound to be differences. In that respect, the films of *Visier I* clearly showed better craftsmanship, while those of *Visier II* marked a conspicuous decline of the series. This was not a matter of the acting: while *Visier I* had an extraordinarily gifted and even charismatic actor playing its main protagonist, those taking over in *Visier II* were competent professionals as well. It is true that Mueller-Stahl deliberately shaped the role of Detjen as he saw fit; namely, as an “adventurer” rather than a Communist “party man,” as he later put it. This input, too, was lost when he left. But that was not the key reason for *Visier’s* subsequent deterioration.

Rather, it was the writing that changed, and we know how: the scripts for *Visier I* had been produced by a pair of experienced authors, Otto Bonhoff and Herbert Schauer. While deeply politically conformist, whether out of conviction or opportunism or both, and thoroughly middle brow in terms of literary skills, they could be relied on to put together a plausibly solid plot within the conventions of the genre. But, while Bonhoff and Schauer had worked closely with the Stasi’s Office of Public Relations—in German the “Abteilung Agitation,” “Pressestelle,” or “Presseabteilung”—after 1976, the writing was taken over by the head of the office itself, Günter Halle, a Stasi colonel with literary ambitions who from then on appeared under the pseudonym Michel Mansfeld in *Visier’s* credits.

Halle, however, was clearly out of his depth: the three stories—in seven films—produced during this period are shot through with glaring inconsistencies, comically clunky twists and turns, and basic errors, such as pedestrian expositions. Even making allowance for the conventions of the genre

and the needs of popular entertainment, they were exceedingly shoddy. Indeed, Halle's scripts were so obviously inept that *Visier II* found harsh critics who openly denounced its convoluted and confusing plots and, in one case, at least, went so far as to ask if the series had lost its drive.<sup>7</sup>

Put differently, if *Visier I* was efficient 1970s popular entertainment that often looks a little quaint only now, in retrospect, *Visier II* was really quite bad by any standards, simply in terms of scripting craft. Yet this study is not concerned with artistic quality but political meanings.

### The East German *Kundschafter* Idealized: Cosmopolitan and Decisive

Regarding those meanings, what all *Visier* films—*I* and *II*—had, unsurprisingly, in common was their highly idealized depiction of the agents of East Germany's combined secret police and intelligence service, the Ministry of State Security (in short, Stasi), referred to, when working in foreign intelligence at least, by the euphemistic term *Kundschafter*, literally meaning a scout or reconnaissance soldier. A calque from the Russian *razvedchik*—used in the same manner by and about the Soviet secret services, the KGB and GRU—the word *Kundschafter* also signaled the Stasi's and East Germany's alignment with the Soviet Union. The fact that, in reality, the preponderant majority of Stasi personnel (about 90 percent at least) were not engaged in foreign espionage but domestic surveillance and repression found no

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7. See "Neue Kundschafter im Visier," (New Kundschafter in the visor), *Der Morgen*, December 19, 1977. By 1981, Halle/Mansfeld's incompetence—and perhaps a failing intuition for the latest political trends as well—led him to fail even more obviously: his "Feuerdrachen"—a stand-alone spy thriller originally planned as a *Visier* sequel—was panned by critics as confused and wooden. See Peter Hoff, "Aufhellung eines dunklen, gefährlichen Geschäftes: 'Feuerdrachen,' ein Film des Fernsehens der DDR" (Illumination of a dark, dangerous business: 'Feuerdrachen,' a film on GDR television), *Neues Deutschland*, December 24, 1981, 4.

reflection in *Visier*.<sup>8</sup> In effect, a small minority of agents—those spying abroad—were highlighted in order to cast an aura of patriotism, adventure, and courage over the many who were, by any standards, home-front enforcers of an authoritarian regime.

As mentioned before, while the Soviet context was specific to the eastern side of the Cold War, *Visier* was also part of a global (East and West, and beyond as well) phenomenon of Cold War popular culture—namely, the systematic heroizing and popularizing of (usually fictitious) intelligence agents. In the West, and then globally, the single most extreme and well-known case has been James Bond, a character invented by middle-brow writer Ian Fleming that, from the early 1960s, became the basis for one of the most profitable movie franchises in the history of cinema.

Yet, as noted above, while often overlooked, the Cold War East produced a rich array of its own intelligence heroes, which cannot be reduced to mere “answers to Bond” or derivatives of Western models in general. At the same time, it is true that, apart from differences, there were commonalities and interactions across Cold War divides. One of the common features that *Visier* shared with many intelligence films globally was the depiction of abroad as both an “invisible front” of dangers and temptations and an exciting realm of adventure as well as consumption. This was a feature that *Visier* clearly shared with the global genre: the well-traveled secret agent as (also) a well-off and suave consumer was a fantasy prominent in Western Cold War culture too.<sup>9</sup> But, of course, in *Visier*, anything linked to

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8. Jens Gieseke, “East German Espionage in the Era of Détente,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31 (2008): 400. In 1989, the Stasi had ninety-one thousand employees, with nine to ten thousand working on foreign intelligence (plus another eleven hundred in military intelligence). These figures were the result of significant expansion: Stasi foreign intelligence in its main branch (the HVAHauptverwaltung Aufklärung) had counted about five hundred to six hundred staff members in 1958, almost three thousand in 1982, and over forty-seven hundred in 1989 (with the same again in various other Stasi branches outside the HVA). See Gieseke, “East German Espionage in the Era of Détente.”

9. On the spy and cosmopolitan fantasies, for instance, see Craig Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary,” *Daedalus* 137 (2008): 106.

mobility across borders and consumption acquired special—though not explicit—associations and significance because East Germany was highly restrictive about letting its citizens travel, and the West in general and West Germany in particular represented the temptation of a conventionally superior, capitalist level of consumerism.

In this regard, it is important to note a peculiarity of the East German situation (and, literally, location): a twentieth-century authoritarian-socialist state with advanced if largely comparatively inefficient industry and typical problems satisfying consumer desires, it was also constantly exposed to West German television for most of its existence. Almost everywhere in their country, East Germans were tuning in not only to news from the capitalist Cold War opponent (who happened to speak the same language) but shows, films, and advertisements displaying, often in idealized form, the consumer advantages of the West.

Thus, *Visier* could not but also be a fantasy about exemplary East German citizens encountering, withstanding, and also enjoying the dangers and temptations of the Western Cold War Other. This included their facing two specific—if always implicit—challenges: a degree of international mobility that was entirely unlike anything the vast majority of ordinary East Germans could experience and the West's advanced consumerism. *Visier*, in effect, addressed both of these issues through what we could describe as an essentially playful—and literally dis-playful—practical cosmopolitanism. Its heroes' sartorial style ranged from elegantly casual to full evening dress. They lived in well-appointed modern apartments and houses, which featured comforts such as pool tables. Viewers saw them hobnobbing with the unsuspecting Western establishment at exclusive and opulent parties, in fine-dining restaurants, occasionally even in a nightclub. They stay at pleasant hotels where they sometimes do their laps in beautiful pools and they even talk openly about wanting to go shopping while in Rome. In *Visier II*, one of the *Kundschafter* team drives an elegant Western vintage sports car and takes Bondesque bubble baths with his girlfriend.



Figure 1: Stasi Kundschafter Tanner in a red vintage Porsche.

© Fernsehserien.de.

Source: © Fernsehserien.de

Examples could be multiplied but the key point is clear enough: it would be very misleading to imagine *Visier's* East German agents, from a regime committed to Communism, as hiding among the Western proletariat or agitating workers. On the contrary, they were depicted as assuming elite identities, such as staff officers, politically and socially well-connected lawyers, or hipsterish fashion photographers. This, of course, made dramatic sense: all spies, after all, have to adapt to their target by dissimulation. Yet, at least in terms of effects, there was more to this facet of *Visier* than the necessities of the plot. It entailed an elite group of, by definition, exemplary East German citizens enacting the dream of having it both ways: being committed in perfect loyalty to East Germany and its official values, ideology, and careers while, at the same time, not paying the usual price of (relative) consumer deprivation.

At the same time, in the case of the Cold War midsize power East Germany, its agents' adventures beyond its borders also served as a fantasy of international reach and influence. Stories about victories in an area that was, by definition, opaque and thus especially open to making things up were ideal instruments of psychological compensation: it is in the nature of victories on an invisible front that they cannot be verified.

Of course, despite its specific East German conditions, in principle this compensation fantasy effect, too, was anything but unique, and we could find it in other national contexts as well: James Bond has embodied the same escapism from a reality of postwar decline. Despite Great Britain's special relationship with the United States, especially after the independence of India in 1947 and the debacle of Suez in 1956, post–World War Two Britain has been a former imperial power that sometimes finds it difficult to adjust to its diminished influence.<sup>10</sup> In a Cold War context, it did have more autonomy and clout than East Germany, exemplified by its own nuclear forces, but not enough to change the fact that it was dependent on its hegemon, the United States.

In Bond movies, this dependency was recast as a partnership, tilted, moreover, in Britain's favor: while the terms of their cooperation change over time, as Lisa Funnell has shown, Bond regularly works with Americans, draws on their assistance, makes friends among them, avenges them, and goes to bed with them as well. But Bond is always not only the “primary hero” but the central and by far most important figure.<sup>11</sup> When the stakes are highest, it is also the British super-agent, not the United States, who is truly indispensable.

## A Special Case of Intranational Internationalism: East Germans Saving West Germans

There was yet another special—and crucial—aspect to *Visier's* relationship with the West: while the films, especially of *Visier II*, repeatedly imply that

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10. Robbie B. H. Goh, “Peter O'Donnell, Race Relations and National Identity: The Dynamics of Representation in 1960s and 1970s Britain,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 32 (1999): 31.

11. Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds, “The Anglo-American Connection: Examining the Intersection of Nationality with Class, Gender, and Race in the James Bond Films,” *Journal of American Culture* 38 (2015): 371.

the East German Kundschafter save the West from itself—that is, the reckless and wicked schemes of its own official as well as concealed elites—this West consists of two categories of places, and one is more important than the other.

It is true that when, for instance, in a set of episodes under the title “The King Kong Flu,” the Stasi agents battle CIA schemes to weaponize psychotropic drugs, viewers are given to understand that the Agency’s evil experiments affect innocent Americans and perhaps even most of all. Thus, by striking a blow against them, *Visier*’s heroes are depicted as protecting these Americans as well, if indirectly. But they do so in West Germany, and the direct beneficiaries of their actions are West Germans. It was this constellation that was typical for *Visier II*. Its single most important motif was not, strictly speaking, international but intranational. Reflecting the special position of the two rival Cold War Germanies, it was a fantasy in which East Germans rescued West Germans.

Likewise, in *Visier*, the broader fantasy of international empowerment took a specific shape: Substantial parts of the stories unfold in countries



Figure 2: CIA Agent Wilson. © IMDb.

Source: © IMDb

that are unambiguously abroad (in the sense of not being Germany) and locations that carry associations of cultural difference and global interests (Argentina, Portugal, Norway, South Africa, Italy, France, Spain, and Corsica). Yet West Germany is at least equally important.

Moreover, whenever *Visier's* agents go beyond West Germany, their operations are still linked to it. They end up in South Africa, for instance, in hot pursuit of surreptitious West German attempts to acquire nuclear weapons or in Italy and France on the tracks of a Western false-flag terrorist organization that involves the CIA and Italian conspirators as well as the West German military. Put differently, while all of the action takes place abroad (i.e., outside East Germany), *Visier's* kind of being abroad often means living in West Germany, a country that is politically very different and geopolitically-ideologically located on the other side of the Cold War but, at the same time, another version of a shared national domain—if in a very contested manner.

This constellation had several implications and effects. At the most pedestrian level, it made it easier to tell stories about successful imitation and infiltration. Cold War East and West Germans shared a language, habits, and cultural codes—by no means perfectly but to an extent that made pretending to be the Cold War Other especially easy.

With regard to the politics of state legitimation, however, this close, special relationship touched on at least two extremely sensitive issues. For one thing, West and East Germans also shared a past, in particular that of Nazism and World War II. As is well known, in East Germany this fact was subject to a complicated form of denial. In essence, the East German regime absurdly defined itself and its society as derived only from the victims of and resisters against Nazism and projected the latter's legacies, ongoing aftereffects, and dangers on postwar West Germany alone. This position was one of the core tenets of East Germany's official doctrine of antifascism, which was second to none in legitimizing the country's existence as a separate and, so the claim, better Germany.

This aspect of East German ideology was central to *Visier I* in particular. In these first *Visier* films, released between 1973 and 1976 and set in the period between 1949/50 and 1961, the single hero Kundschafter's (Mueller-Stahl as Detjen) initial task was to fight an international network of unrepentant Nazis and militarists who are planning a comeback while successfully infiltrating West Germany's political, military, and intelligence elites. Even though this mission also involved contemporary issues, such as West German rearmament or alleged plans to provoke a war against East Germany, the background of Nazism—and Nazis personally—still alive and kicking, if covertly, was always present.

In *Visier II*, this theme is not entirely absent: a key villain is still a character introduced in *Visier I* as a former SS officer and war criminal who has eluded detection and punishment to turn into a wily postwar Nazi network cadre, well connected to crime, business, and intelligence. But the weight of this motif is clearly reduced. Instead, in *Visier II*, set in the 1960s, contemporary aspects dominate in the operations of its team of agents. Even when they face off against neofascists committing terrorist attacks under a Maoist false flag, the emphasis is on their opponents being precisely *new* fascists, often fairly young men and women produced in the postwar period, not merely old diehards of Nazism.

Another striking difference between *Visier I* and *II* has to do with how the films' Stasi heroes relate to ordinary West Germans, those who are not part of either Nazi or post-Nazi elites. In *Visier I*, such characters appear, but, mostly, they do not occupy much of the hero's attention. This was perfectly reconcilable with official East German thinking, which postulated explicitly that, ideally, ordinary citizens of capitalist states should manifest a "progressive" attitude by helping the Kundschafter from the "world socialist system."<sup>12</sup> Far from treason or spying, such assistance was to be understood as an "integral part of the international class struggle," according to, for

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12. Tuchel, "Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit und die 'Rote Kapelle'" (The ministry for state security and the 'red chapel'), 245.

instance, Karl-Heinz Biernat, a scholar and doctrine intellectual based at the East German Communist Party's Institute for Marxism-Leninism, a Communist think tank.<sup>13</sup>

In the same spirit, the operations of the Kundschafter were idealized as serving not simply the interests or even security of East Germany but the preservation of world peace as such, by helping the "socialist states under the leadership of the Soviet Union" defang the aggressive policies and militarist plots of the West.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the Kundschafter protected the ordinary citizens of the West as well—namely, from their wicked rulers. Complimentarily, these noble fantasy agents never targeted "the working people" (*werktätiges Volk*).<sup>15</sup> This was the meaning of the "humanism" for which *Visier* was often praised:<sup>16</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, East Germany's main newspaper, celebrated the films as combining thrilling entertainment, the "political unmasking" of Western interests and regimes, and a "great humane concern."<sup>17</sup>

There was, thus, nothing surprising about the fact that the hero of *Visier I* did no harm to ordinary West Germans or, indeed, ordinary people anywhere. On the contrary, he was repeatedly shown as getting along especially

13. Bundesarchiv (BA) DY 30/IV A 2/9.07/53: [380] ["DY 30/IV A 2/9.07/53: 380" is an archival signature.] After a hostile takeover of the Social-Democratic Party in 1946, the Communist party in East Germany called itself the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED).

14. Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (DRA) Schriftgut, Bestand FS, Dramatische Kunst, Das Unsichtbare Visier, A 081-05-02/0001 TSig 001-010, "Herbert Schauer, creator, *Das unsichtbare Visier. Inhaltsangabe des zweiten Komplexes*," 3. East Germany, or authoritarian-socialist regimes in general, had no monopoly on the myth of espionage as securing peace. Introducing, for instance, a 1937 radio drama version of the 1915 spy thriller classic "The 39 Steps" (also made into a Hitchcock movie in 1937), an American military intelligence officer praised secret agents as "one of the greatest forces for world peace."

15. BStU MfS ZAIG 26967: 21. For an example of the special stress on saving the peace for West Germans as well, see "Wertvoller Gegenwartsfilm der DEFA" (A valuable contemporary film by DEFA), *Neues Deutschland*, July 21, 1963.

16. BStU MfS ZAIG 26967: 21.

17. "Abenteuerfilm 'Unsichtbares Visier,'" (Adventure film "Invisible Visor"), *Neues Deutschland (Berliner Ausgabe)*, December 27, 1973; and "Mörderischer Alltag im unsichtbaren Visier" (Murderous everyday life in *Invisible Visor*), *Neues Deutschland*, December 20, 1978.

well with them—for instance, when making friends with—and getting important information from—local farmhands and gauchos on a ranch in Argentina used as a Nazi hideout.

*Visier II*, however, went significantly further: its team of agents does more than merely abstain from hurting innocent Western bystanders or even protect them in the abstract, as indirect beneficiaries of that “world peace” guarded by the Kundschafter operations. In *Visier II*, they repeatedly rescue—or at least try to do so—individual West Germans, victimized by the dirty politics, flawed family and social relationships, moral hypocrisy, dark conspiracies, and ruthless secret service operations of the capitalist West, as shown and/or caricatured in *Visier*. Put differently, in these later films of the franchise, there is a clear new pattern, a motif of East Germans saving West Germans. It is crucial to note that while doing so the *Visier II* heroes even clearly go beyond—and take more risks than—what is necessary for their intelligence missions. Put differently, the Kundschafter are depicted as so idealistic and morally invested that they are more than good agents who also happen to be good human beings: in effect, they are recast as moralists who happen to be on an intelligence mission. And in that process, they de facto privilege the other Cold War Germans as in need of their protection.

### “The Afrikaanse Broederbond”: (Almost) Saving a West German Whistleblower

Thus, in the three films that together form the first story arc of *Visier II*, under the title “The Afrikaanse Broederbond,” the team of Stasi agents battles against a complicated West German–South African ploy to transfer West German technology to the then apartheid regime in South Africa and build nuclear weapons together. Things get more complicated again, when it turns out that the American CIA is involved as well, seeking to control West Germany in the interests of US hegemony (if not necessarily to prevent West Germany’s acquisition of the bomb).

At the same time, viewers learn that, at a research center in South Africa, Bonn (former West Germany's capital) and Pretoria are already cooperating on the development of chemical weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This part of the plot is essential, driving much of the films' action by focusing on the desperate struggle of a West German engineer, Jürgen Machholz, who works at the WMD development facility and contaminates himself with a new chemical agent by accident, which leaves him terminally ill. While his employers try, in essence, to murder him as now dispensable and inconvenient, he escapes to Germany where he hopes to find treatment. To facilitate the latter, he pilfers a sample of the secret as well as illegal substance that is slowly killing him. He also tries to make contact with a journalist. Put differently, although Machholz is no natural born rebel, his despair is turning him into a potential whistleblower. Clearly afraid of politically disruptive revelations, South African and West German agents try to find and kill him. When they do not succeed, they start targeting his wife.



Figure 3: West German engineer and victim of capitalist intrigue Machholz looking for help, while *Visier* team leader Clemens keeps a watchful eye on him. © IMDb.

Source: © IMDb

Against this background, *Visier's* team of Stasi agents not only undermines this nefarious West German–South African cooperation but also dupes the CIA. They also save Machholz from an assassination attempt. And while they cannot prevent his death from his initial contamination, they manage to protect his wife and rescue her in a dramatic—as well as perfectly implausible—operation in South Africa. The last thing viewers see of her is how she escapes on a flight to Warsaw, clearly implying that she will not return to West Germany but start a new life on the other side of the Cold War divide.

## King Kong Flu: Saving West Germans from the CIA

In the second adventure of *Visier II*, which unfolded in two films under the title “King Kong Grippe” (King Kong Flu), chemical weapons play a key role again. Only this time, it is the CIA itself that—in a clear if freewheeling allusion to real, historic CIA research, such as Project MKUltra—is depicted as running experiments with them, not only among unwitting citizens at home but abroad as well, in this case in West Germany.

While not bereft of references to reality, the “King Kong Flu” episode was still especially implausible on the whole and in detail: viewers were told that experiments with weaponized drugs were conducted widely in American public space, in such a manner that random citizens could be exposed while using an airport, the New York City subway, or a highway tunnel. Moreover, the plot of “King Kong Flu” turned on the CIA running, or trying to run, the same kind of experiments on soldiers of the West German army, a whole small town, and an individual provincial businessman, Alois Leutwiler. The latter is systematically driven to suicide by a combination of surreptitious drugging and devastating public revelations of his commercial and political corruption as well as less than perfect family life—all for purely experimental purposes.

If the story was far-fetched in general, its twists and turns were even more unbelievable: a secret West German army research facility (hidden under a medieval castle), also busy with chemical warfare, simply happens to be in the same nondescript town (seemingly) selected at random by a CIA computer for testing; Leutwiler also is an old friend of the CIA operative who directs his cumbersome assassination by psychological pressure and drugs; and, of course, that friendship is less than reliable, in part because the businessman's only daughter is, in reality, the CIA officer's daughter.

All of the above (and more) made for an especially scurrilous yarn that featured West (not East) German and CIA agents killing each other in and around an empty church in the West German back-of-beyond, a masked, ninja-like character scaling things in a black onesie, and a grand-finale explosion of dynamite conveniently left lying around in a hole in the ground since, at least, the postwar years yet still good to go.

*Visier's* heroes, meanwhile, secure a sample of not only the CIA drug but of the antidote as well, pointedly unlike the agents of the West German competition who are trying but failing to do the same. Clearly, with both drug and antidote finally in safe hands with the Stasi, viewers were meant to feel relief: surely, these samples would be put to purely defensive uses alone.

Yet, as in the preceding “Afrikaanse Broederbond” films, the Stasi Kundschafter manage to do even more—namely, rescue West Germans, in this case en masse and individually. Regarding en masse, they foil the CIA's attempt to contaminate the local church's holy water. With respect to individuals, it is true that Alois Leutwiler cannot be saved from the American plot. But he is also a deeply unsympathetic character, a caricature of a rich, exploitative, and heartless capitalist who is also a corrupt politician from the CDU (West Germany's party of mainstream conservatism) and a criminal seeking to cover up a massive real estate scheme.<sup>18</sup>

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18. In a very disturbing visual twist, one scene in Leutwiler's villa—in the far background—includes a candle holder that looks like a Jewish menorah. Otherwise, there do not seem to be any hints implying that Leutwiler is Jewish. The striking, if short, appearance of the menorah is hard to interpret: Was it meant as a deliberate if coded signal and thus an

Leutwiler's daughter, Georgia, really fathered by his false friend from the CIA, however, is an entirely different matter: an attractive young woman, she is depicted as altruistic and compassionate, if naïve. Viewers are clearly supposed to see her as an innocent victim of her family's hypocrisy. Put differently, she may have had the misfortune of being born into the rich bourgeoisie, but she is also a damsel in distress as well as a—local-scale—upper-class princess with a heart of gold. Her dad may be an ogre, his stately villa a cursed castle, but she needs not class struggle but rescuing. Which is what the youngest member of the Stasi team, the dashing “Genosse Alexander,” masquerading as a fashion photographer with a serious art education, will do in the end. In a scene somewhat reminiscent of the American film classic *The Graduate*, “King Kong Flu” closes with Georgia leaving her corrupt philistine home for good, driving away together with Alexander.

And lest viewers misunderstand the meaning of this striking scene, a preceding conversation between Alexander and the leader of the Kundschafter



Figure 4: Georgia Leutwiler. © Google Play.

Source: © Google Play

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instance of *Visier* conveying an anti-Semitic stereotype? Was it the outcome of sheer ignorance on the part of a scene decorator? Or perhaps meant as a nasty “joke” of some kind? From the available evidence, it is impossible to tell. But it is a detail that should be noted.

team, the older, kind, and distinguished “Dr. Clemens”—a cultivated man who knows his wines—makes clear two important points: Alexander genuinely cares for Georgia, notwithstanding that their putative random meeting was, in reality, initially merely a piece of spy tradecraft to get closer to the Leutwiler family.

Second, it is not only the young Alexander who believes that helping Georgia is an obvious priority, even if it has nothing to do with the intelligence mission of the team, which has already been completed. Rather, Clemens explicitly gives his blessing as well. In other words, Alexander picking up Georgia to help her escape her capitalist origins and confines is neither a James Bond-like final scene of sexual conquest, nor is it in conflict with the Stasi agent’s orders. Those come from the sage Clemens, and his agreement signals that Alexander’s rescue of Georgia is in alignment with the Kundschafter team’s code of conduct. In sum, Georgia is saved not simply by a young man acting out of a mixture of romantic and moral motives who happens to also be a Stasi agent but by the Stasi itself: a Stasi that *Visier II* depicts as at least as keen to help the innocent victims of the West German political and social order as on reconnoitering its secrets. In essence, it is almost as if this motif of *Visier II* foreshadowed the American 1980s series *The Equalizer*, in which a retired CIA agent has nothing better to do than offer his help to whoever has the “odds against” them.

## Island of Death: Preparing to Hand on the Baton?

Finally, there was “Insel des Todes” (Island of Death), the third adventure of the team of agents at the center of *Visier II*, and the last in the *Visier* franchise as a whole. Its two films made use of historic events of terrorism and political instability in postwar Western Europe—in particular the so-called Years of Lead in Italy—to tell a story of a secret campaign aiming at regime change in favor of the far right by a “strategy of tension”: *Visier*’s heroes this



Figure 5: Moffo, the face of neofascist conspiracy in Italy. © IMDb.

Source: © IMDb

time have to battle a group of conspirators seeking to prepare the ground for several coup d'états, in Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Led by the CIA, these villains include various European government officials, neofascists, a few old Nazis, the West German secret service and army, and even some clueless Maoist and Trotskyist extremists. Staging false-flag terrorist attacks, the conspirators seek to implicate the Left and create opportunities for authoritarian takeovers from the Right.

Against this background, *Visier's* Kundschafter team manages to obtain revealing information about the conspiracy. Yet what makes “Insel des Todes” unique in the *Visier* franchise is that their activities are not dominating the action and often recede into the background. Instead, much of the center and foreground of the story are occupied by a character who has nothing to do with East Germany or the Stasi, a French everyman who turns into an unrelenting—and incredibly efficient—avenger when the neofascist network kills half his family.

One of the false-flag terrorist attacks consists of planting a bomb at the train station of the Italian city of Milan. Among the random victims are

the wife and son of Marcel Laffitte.<sup>19</sup> Laffitte, who happens to have been a French paratrooper and explosives expert, sets out to find their killers and those behind them, quickly hitting on the regime-change campaign led by the CIA. As to be expected, after the requisite twists and turns, he succeeds: after infiltrating the conspiracy, he kills one of the two immediate perpetrators of the Milan bombing as well as the midranking cadre who ordered it and mines the plotters' high-tech headquarters—including a hidden submarine hangar—on an island off the French coast in the Mediterranean, the eponymous Island of Death.

Laffitte, it bears emphasis, unlike the Machholz couple from the “Afrikaanse Broederbond” or Georgia from “King Kong Flu,” hardly needs any help. On the contrary, it is Laffitte who twice saves a member of the Kundschafter team, Winnie Winkelmann, not vice versa. The first time, when Winkelmann tries to reconnoiter the Island of Death and is almost caught,

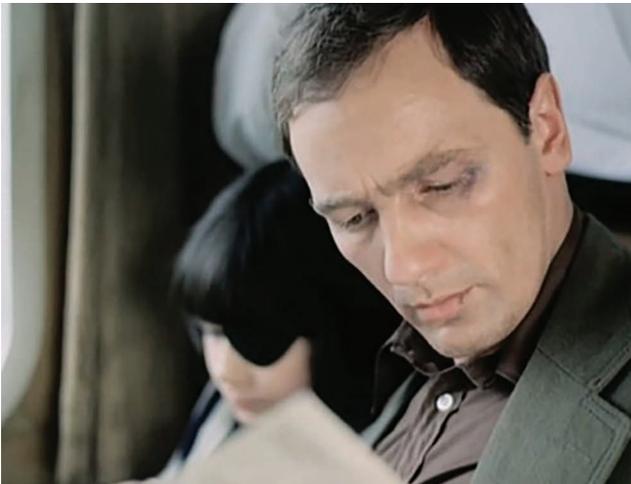


Figure 6: Marcel Laffitte and his surviving daughter. © IMDb.

Source: © IMDb

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19. In an entirely different context, the name “Laffitte” occurs in Karl Marx’s classic *The Class Struggles in France*. Its use in *Visier* may have been an ideological in-joke of sorts.

she gets away only thanks to Laffitte. Later, when an assassin tries to kill her, Laffitte saves her again.

Subsequently, Winkelmann and Laffitte cooperate to sabotage the neofascist network, crippling its arms supply. True to style, in this cooperation Laffitte is definitely not a junior partner. In fact, if anything, he makes the bigger contribution by disrupting the network's communications, distracting its operatives, and devising a cunning plan to break into one of its hideouts, destroy its arms store, and free a hostage. During that operation, it is, again, Laffitte, the apolitical French (almost-) everyman who quite literally tells Winkelmann, the professional Stasi Kundschafter, what to do.

Moreover, Laffitte is not only clearly the single most important hero of "Insel des Todes." Occasionally, he is also intriguingly reminiscent of the single hero agent of *Visier I*. Thus, like Achim Detjen in the first version of *Visier*, Marcel Laffitte succeeds by subverting a secret organization from within. For Detjen, it was the old Nazi network; for Laffitte, it is the neofascist conspiracy ultimately run by the CIA. Like *Visier I*'s Detjen as well, Laffitte scores his biggest hit when he infiltrates a medieval castle that serves nefarious new purposes: in *Visier I*, a German castle is the site of a key meeting on rearming West Germany; for Laffitte in *Visier II*, its French equivalent provides camouflage for the neofascist organization's island lair. And both Laffitte and Detjen use old, hidden passageways to dupe their antagonists. Viewers with a good memory would have seen echoes in individual shots too: Laffitte exploring the French castle and a system of tunnels underneath it with the help of a flashlight visually recalls Detjen doing, in essence, the same at the West German site of the rearmament conference.

If Laffitte was notably central to the last *Visier* adventure, like no inhabitant of the West before, he may have been meant for greater things still. At the very end of "Insel des Todes," he learns from Winkelmann that his attempt to expose the whole conspiracy by providing a prosecutor with evidence of its crimes has failed. While he has killed most of the murderers of his family, the upper echelons and masterminds of the plot, including the

head of the Italian secret service, are, in essence, getting away. He vows to “return to the Island of Death.”

Yet *Visier* was discontinued.<sup>20</sup> But there may have been plans to go on and, in particular, to produce a sequel of this particular story. Laffitte’s final vow, the fact that despite some setbacks the neofascist conspiracy was still essentially intact, and the curious anticlimactic detail that viewers see Laffitte mine its headquarters but not blow them up all point to such a possibility. Was there a plan to make the Laffitte character even more important, a sort of second Detjen, once again shifting the emphasis from a team of Kundschafter to a more or less single hero, as in *Visier P*? If so, it is fascinating that Laffitte was French, not German (whether East or West), bereft of any recognizable political attitude, and joined the struggle against the neofascists for motives of personal revenge. Was he meant to develop, under the tutelage of Stasi guidance, into a more conscious hero of socialist intelligence, pronouncedly internationalist since coming from a capitalist country in the West? Probably, we will never know.

What we do know is intriguing enough, however. If we look at *Visier I* and *II* as a whole, there were two clear changes in how the films depicted the East German Kundschafter’s relationship with ordinary people in the West. In *Visier I*, the latter play a secondary role in that the Kundschafter hero has fairly little to do with them. While certainly never harming them, he also does not protect or rescue individuals. In the first two stories of *Visier II*, we see his successors from the Kundschafter team go out of their way to do just that. And, finally, in the last instalment of *Visier II*, and thus *Visier* in general, an ordinary man from the West turns into the central hero of the film, doing most of the real work of fighting the neofascist enemy, saving a member of the Kundschafter team, and, on the whole, clearly overshadowing the latter.

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20. There was a subsequent spin-off, “Fire Dragon” (Feuerdrachen), and an unrealized plan for a second spin-off under the title “Jungle of Missiles” (Raketenschungel). See Haller, “Imaginations of Insecurity,” 206.

## Conclusion

*Visier* was a fantasy about noble East German agents heroically battling the Western Cold War Other on its own turf. It was unexceptional in its pronounced lack of realism, which is no strength of escapist film entertainment anywhere. Its politics were, generally speaking, unsurprising as well: the Cold War East was good, the West was bad; capitalism was corrupt and cynical, socialism Soviet-style (roughly speaking) was clean and humane; and finally, the legacies of fascism were alive in the West (especially West Germany), and not in the East (not even in East Germany). So far, so predictable.

Yet, as shown above, a closer, careful look reveals that *Visier*—even its often shoddily scripted second, team-based iteration—was a rich artifact of Cold War popular culture, with complex and even unexpected messages. Regarding complexity, the image of the heroic East German agent included a running comment of compensatory wish fulfillment. Here were ideal East German citizens doing their duty, deserving admiration at home, and yet also getting a fair slice of the capitalist good life abroad, out of reach for most of their compatriots. On top of that, these agents consistently punched above their weight vicariously for East Germany as a whole. Like Britain's James Bond, they served an at-best middling power and yet were doing major things in the world at large. And finally, perhaps most satisfyingly of all, they turned into gentle, benevolent guardian angels of hapless West German cousins, neatly reversing West Germany's claims of superiority.

But what emerges as *Visier's* most unexpected turn also marked the end of the franchise: the elevation of an unpolitical, if heroic, Western everyman (from France, not West Germany) into the films' real key hero. Since *Visier* was not continued, we will never know whether this was meant to remain an exceptional move or to initiate a whole new framing of the franchise.

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