

The Spook Who Sat by the Door

By Michael T. Martin & David C. Wall

Based on Sam Greenlee's provocative 1969 novel and, some say, urban revolutionary primer of the same name, Ivan Dixon's "The Spook Who Sat By the Door" (1973) tells the story of Dan Freeman, erstwhile CIA operative and consummate revolutionary organizer. Aware of his status as the CIA's token affirmative action trainee, recruited in order to demonstrate the agency's commitment to racial integration, Freeman's carefully considered strategy is to maintain a low profile even while excelling at all of the agency's tests for both intellectual and physical prowess. Thus, unfailingly polite and apparently always eager to please, he is the living embodiment of Ellison's invisible man, "yessing whitey to death" while discreetly learning everything he possibly can about urban guerrilla warfare. Finishing his apprenticeship with the CIA he returns to Chicago and proceeds to organize the Freedom Fighters, a clandestine militia, out of the disparate and ill-disciplined Cobras street gang of his former neighborhood.

In many ways, "The Spook Who Sat By the Door" is very much a product in correspondence with its historical moment. Greenlee, who himself had worked as a Foreign Service Officer for the United States Information Agency in Iraq, East Pakistan and Indonesia during the 1950s to mid-60s, conceived of his novel while living in Mykonos, Greece in the summer of 1965. In response to decolonization struggles throughout Africa and Asia, as well as the increasingly fraught and fractious trajectories of the civil rights movement in the U.S., Greenlee "determined to write the story of a Third World colonial revolution as it might happen in the United States."¹ By the time the novel was published in the U.S. in 1969, the rhetoric of non-violent protest as embodied in Martin Luther King Jr.'s SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) had been rivaled by more militant voices of "Black power" most notably those of SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) and the Black Panthers. This in turn reflected a broader radicalization of social protest manifest increasingly by such disparate revolutionary organizations as the White Panthers, The Black Liberation Army, The Symbionese Liberation Army, Weather Underground, and the broad anti-Vietnam war coalition in solidarity with other anti-colonial struggles in the global South. Further, events such as the police riot in Chicago at the 1968 Democratic Convention and subsequent show trials of the Chicago Seven, the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, the 1969 assassination of Chicago Black Panther Fred Hampton, the murder of students at Kent State and Jackson State, all attest to the volatility and indeterminacy of American society in the years leading up to the re-

lease of "The Spook Who Sat By the Door" in 1973. Reflecting and refracting the tumult of these febrile political and racial contexts and events, the film itself was no less incendiary in its uncompromising vision of an



American society on the brink of revolution. The screenplay, written by Greenlee and Melvin Clay, offers a broadly non-orthodox Marxist social analysis rooted in Third World independence movements and combined with the radical racial discourses of thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Stokely Carmichael. Indeed, like Gillo Pontecorvo's "The Battle of Algiers" (1966) and "Burn! ["Queimada!"], 1969) that foreground the peasantry and lumpen-proletariat as vanguard in revolutionary formations, in "Spook" the urban underclass and other marginal groups practice agential authority, constituting the vanguard for revolutionary change rather than proletariat.

Lawrence Cook as Dan Freeman and Janet League as Joy. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

The film's director Ivan Dixon, who had first found fame as an actor in Michael Roemer's "Nothing But a Man" (1964) followed by his role as Sergeant James Kinchloe in the CBS sitcom "Hogan's Heroes" (1965-1971), shared with Greenlee a determination to present black agency, black heroes, and powerful black characters who refuse to comply with the dominant tropes and stereotypes of Hollywood's representations of race. But they were also concerned to lay an economic critique across the vectors of race. This conjoining of determinant categories of both race and class are most clearly enunciated by Dan Freeman, instructing gang members that they understand themselves as a lumpen-proletariat (read underclass), no less oppressed by the structural enclosures of class than by those of race. For example, at one critical point in the film, Freeman declares that the uprising is not about hating white people but in loving and longing for freedom for everyone. In this regard, the film is, arguably, most challenging by positing America's ghettos as internal colonies and class struggle led by a black revolutionary vanguard but whose efficacy and success depends on solidarity across racial lines. (Consider, too, that when King conjoined racial discrimi-

nation and economic inequality as both symptoms of capitalism his threat to ruling class interests was most amplified, sealing his fate.) Indeed, some of the film's most excoriating critique is reserved for the 'black bourgeoisie' cast in the character of Joy (played by Janet League) who, as the wife of a prominent black doctor, articulates an unexamined investment in the social, economic, and racial status quo. Admonishing Dan, she defensively says, "Don't romanticize those people Dan. They're not beautiful . . . those Freedom Fighters are murderers!" However, a corresponding female character, The Dahomey Queen (Paula Kelly) labors on behalf of the revolutionaries by spying on the CIA directorate's plans to quell the rebellion, thus speaking just as powerfully to black women's role in the struggle forward. In presenting the Dahomey Queen in this way, "Spook" proffers a conception of black women as freedom fighters no less important than their male counterparts. And, too, *Spook* conceives of a revolutionary practice that simultaneously engages the state security apparatus from within (by infiltrators, disaffected police and military personnel, and professionals) as it does from without by armed combatants.

As may be apparent from the description above, "Spook" is highly unusual for an American film in that its radical left-wing politics are so overt and explicit. In a general sense, any dominant cultural apparatus will always appropriate and transform initiatives that threaten to destabilize it. Consequently, any narrative and visual possibilities under hegemonic conditions of representation are perhaps inevitably compromised. And, indeed, the ideological and anti-systemic concerns in "Spook" did not trump economic ones in Hollywood's distribution of the film. Of some significance in this context, is the 1971 release of Melvin Van Peebles' independently financed "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song." The film's massive success saw the major Hollywood studios rush to replicate its themes and tropes and, in doing so, the emergence of what came to be termed "Blaxploitation" cinema. But the political possibilities of Blaxploitation in terms of its presentation of powerful black heroes, standing up to "the man," and living entirely self-determined lives became rapidly compromised as the genre veered increasingly towards celebration of drugs and violence and the propagation of highly sexually charged black stereotypes.

United Artists response to this problematic film was to initially market "Spook" as a Blaxploitation film but it quickly became apparent that this was no ordinary Blaxploitation flick. It is at this point that the historical and political contexts of the film collide and where the singular place that "The Spook Who Sat By the Door" occupies in the history of American political cinema becomes apparent. Firstly, the production itself was subject to multiple

obstacles. Though set in Chicago, the filmmakers (at the behest of then Mayor Richard Daley) were refused permission to film anywhere in the city. As a consequence, "Spook" was shot almost entirely just across state lines in Gary, Indiana where the filmmakers were welcomed with an entire array of institutional support and resources (even be allowed the use of a Gary Police Department helicopter in order to get some overhead footage of the riot scenes.) Though in hindsight "Spook"'s assertion of the immediate possibility of armed revolution might seem a somewhat naive fantasy of resistance that could never have played out in an American context, at the time it was a theorized and commanding vision enough for the *LA Times*' Kevin Thomas to call the film "one of the most terrifying movies ever made."²

Many of those involved in the film's production believe that it was certainly subversive enough for the FBI to become involved with the quiet removal of the film from exhibition. In Christine Achem's documentary, "Infiltrating Hollywood: The Rise and Fall of *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*" (2011), Greenlee claims that movie theaters in Chicago were subject to visits from representatives of the FBI advising that it would be in everybody's best interests if the film were pulled from display. Though there is no direct evidence for this, it is certainly a view widely-held by all those involved in the film's production and considering the dizzying array of disruptive tactics employed by Hoover's FBI and the Cointelpro program from the late 1960s onwards it is certainly by no means far-fetched to consider this plausible. All original copies of the film disappeared except for one that the film's director Ivan Dixon secured in a storage facility under an assumed name. Having made the underground rounds on VHS throughout the 1980s and 1990s *Spook* was finally rereleased on DVD in 2004 after which it has begun to receive the kind of critical and historical attention it demands.

¹ Sam Greenlee, "The Making of *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*." (Unpublished email correspondence with authors, July 9, 2012.)

² Kevin Thomas, "Melodrama with Powerful Message," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1973.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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