



A Decade in Review: What We Brits Saw And What We Didn't (2000-2009)

by Ian Dickerson

Editor's Note: When I asked for submissions for the "Decade in Review" series, I expected, and for the most part, got batches of short reviews that were integrated together into overviews with multiple perspectives from a variety of writers. Hence the richly diverse two part features on the best spy movies from 2000-2009 and the companion piece on spy literature in the same decade. (You can find these articles in the "Spies in History and Literature" and "Spies on Films" files here at Spywise.net.)

Well, my friend Ian Dickerson took a different road, which should surprise no one who knows him. He instead contributed the lively, personable, and quirky essay below on British TV spies. For those who don't know him, Ian is the long-time Honorary Secretary of "The Saint Club," webmaster of LeslieCharteris.com—in short, he's the main Keeper of the Flame for one Simon Templar. You can read all about Ian in my interview with him, "A Saint I Ain't": Q&A with Ian Dickerson of The Saint Club" posted in the aforementioned "Spies and Literature" files at this website.

But Ian is a man of many interests with many insider friends and is an astute observer of what makes for great spy TV. Here's his thoughts on what he saw,

and what he didn't, on the U.K. telly this decade. We Yanks should feel very grateful-- (Wesley Britton)

I recklessly volunteered to help Wes Britton with "a series of articles on the best, most influential, most significant spy projects so far in the 21st Century". And even more recklessly I volunteered to focus on TV because I figured that working in it and watching a hell of a lot of it might just give me a head start. Should be a doddle, I thought. Won't take long, I thought.

And then I thought some more. There weren't actually that many spy-related TV shows that sprang to mind that had aired over the course of the last decade—have spy shows really been that rare or have they just not permeated my consciousness?

O.k., for the sake of my ego I'd like to think it's a pretty switched on consciousness, at least as far as spy shows go. I love 'em, love anything remotely like'em. I like the good ones and like some of the bad ones as well. I spend way too much time online so figure that any show the retarded English networks don't want to pick up, well I'd of least have heard of them.

But I still couldn't name more than a couple—*Burn Notice* and *Spooks*, before you ask. I love *Burn Notice* because it is everything a 21st Century spy series should be, one foot in reality, the other in fiction. It is a straightforward descendant of the spy shows that used to populate the airwaves in the 1960s; complete and utter nonsense, full of gadgets, full of bad guys, full—well, occasionally—of damsels in distress and most importantly full of fun.

Spooks, though, is a product of our times. Although it's strayed from its original strapline—"MI5 not 9 to 5" in case you'd forgotten--in favour of outright topicality, you can't fault the gripping and relevant storylines or the thrilling action

sequences. But it's also notable by its complete and utter absence of humor and the fact that each and every one of the characters take their job so seriously. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing given their line of work, but as a viewer it does make the characters seem less human and more robotic. Even Daniel Craig's Bond has more character than some of the folks in Spooks. Which should tell you what I think of *Quantum of Solace*. But I digress.

Actually writing the previous paragraph about Spooks has reminded me of something I was trying to forget. *Spooks: Code 9* was the BBC's woeful attempt to make the Spooks landscape more relevant to a younger audience. It was always going to struggle—a spin-off from a show that hung every plot point on current events was always going to be tough, but setting it just a few years in what's become an apocalyptic future and grabbing your lead actors straight from drama school was just plain silly. The stories were silly, the acting at times painful and the whole concept just misplaced.

So there you have it. Three spy series named without trying too hard. But what about the rest? There can't have been just 3 spy shows in the last decade, can there? Well no, there weren't, and I suspect many of you reading this—if you've got this far—will be screaming at me for missing out your favourite. And a little research shows that I did miss quite a few.

The much maligned rehash of *The Bionic Woman* was rapidly relegated over here to one of the smaller network channels (ITV 2) which meant it was never going to gain a profile amongst the viewing masses. And I think that's a shame, for if they could have conquered the massive variances from episode to episode—caused, I believe, by the ever changing production crew--and given the show a bit more of a chance it might have matured into something more watchable.

Alias, *Le Femme Nikita*, and *24* have a lot in common as far as I'm concerned. Aside from the probably obvious thing by now—I've never seen them—their respective broadcast histories in the UK have involved starting off on a major broadcast network but quickly slipping away to a questionable timeslot and then onto one of the minor satellite channels (and for those who wonder if I qualify Sky 1 as a minor network, well it is only available to around 1 in 6 of the population, so yes...). So I can't comment on them because I haven't seen them, but I will admit that in the course of doing a little research for this piece, I'm beginning to think *Alias* would be worth looking at...

Sigh. Gone are the days, at least in UK TV, when one show could gain maximum exposure on a broadcast network and when one show, whether it be imported or homegrown, would be given a chance to grow and develop an audience. Nowadays if you don't hit the numbers within just a few weeks, you're dead. And that hasn't done spy shows any favors. They are, by their nature, high concept and not cheap to produce. Which means that not only do you need a solid home audience but a good foreign audience as well.

Take some recent examples—*Burn Notice*, for example, got an audience of 6 million for its 2009 season premiere in the USA. In the UK it airs on the FX network where it'll be lucky if it even gets the 100 000 viewers required for it to register in the ratings. Its saving grace, I suspect, is that it's sold to around 40 different countries.

Leverage, which o.k. isn't strictly speaking a spy show, is in a similar kettle of fish. It averages around 4m viewers on its home network of TNT. It's a slightly younger show than *Burn Notice* and has sold to around 30 countries internationally. When it came to the UK, the producers tried to sell it to the major domestic networks but they weren't interested, with more than one offering a pitiful fee that would mean the producers would make a financial loss. The irony is that the fee the producers were looking for was around the same as the cost of

an hour of day time TV. As it is the show has sold to Virgin, who will run it on their general entertainment channel.

With spy shows running on minor networks like this, it's harder for them to permeate into the public consciousness, making their potential audiences a lot smaller and their life a lot shorter. Which is a great shame, because there's been some marvelous TV spies at work in this decade, and they deserve a much larger audience. Me, I'd like to see a few of them sometime—

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