

Intelligence in Public Media

Sicario

Directed by Denis Villeneuve, screenplay by Taylor Sheridan, 2015, 121 min.

Reviewed by James Burrige and John Kavanagh

CIA has always been an easy target for filmmakers looking to exploit themes of corruption and conspiracy in high places. In the happy ending films, the mid-level hero or heroine, serving as a stand-in for the audience, exposes the conspiracy and saves the Republic. In the alternative ending, the truth bearer is silenced, bureaucratically or lethally. Examples include *Three Days of the Condor*, in which analysts at a predecessor to the Open Source Center stumble upon a CIA plot to control the oil market and are all murdered for their diligence (1975). In *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), it's DDI Jack Ryan exposing a DO plan to form an alliance with a Columbian drug cartel. In the Bourne series (now up to four films), Jason Bourne is after the rogue CIA senior officers who made him a killing machine and now want him dead. In *JFK* (1991), it's Jim Garrison, ultimately defeated and discredited in his quest to expose CIA's involvement in the assassination and coverup. In *The Good Shepherd* (2006), there are too many conspiracies to count.

In reviewing these films—indeed, in deciding whether or not to review them—it's important to distinguish between the purely fictional and the advocacy vehicles such as *JFK* and *The Good Shepherd*. *Sicario* (“hitman” in Spanish) is in the former group; it does not claim to be “inspired by real events” and there is therefore no need to compare the filmmaker's vision with reality, or seek hidden agendas in the changes. It is a “CIA is evil” conspiracy story, without moral ambiguity or nuance. Beautifully filmed and well acted, it is simply there to experience. We review it here as a completely fictional story about CIA that readers may be interested in; put aside your righteous indignation and sit back and enjoy the review.

Emily Blunt plays Kate Macer, an idealist and by-the-book FBI agent who's invited to work with a mysterious counternarcotics task force composed of US Marshals, DEA officers, and Delta Force soldiers. It is led by Matt Graver, played by Josh Brolin; Kate later learns that he is a CIA Special Activities Division officer. Graver's partner

is an enigmatic man named Alejandro Gillick, played by Benicio del Toro. The first mission is to extract a Mexican cartel bigwig from Juárez. On their way out, the convoy gets stuck in the cross-border backup and a firefight ensues with carloads of cartel gunman determined to retrieve the prisoner. All the gunmen are killed, and when Kate expresses concern about the media coverage of a shootout at the border, Matt assures her that there will be no media coverage. Matt and Alejandro waterboard the prisoner and learn the location of the cartel leader in Mexico.

The strategy is to disrupt the cartel's money-laundering operations to the point where Manual Diaz, the cartel's senior representative in the United States, is forced to travel to Mexico to meet the cartel boss, Fausto Alarcón. Kate wants to arrest everyone in the money-laundering chain, but her FBI seniors counsel her that a long-term counter-cartel strategy has been dictated by “senior elected officials” and that prosecuting small or even medium sized fish isn't part of the plan.

The next operation is to create a diversion at a smuggler's tunnel in order for Alejandro to enter Mexico and go after the cartel leader, following Diaz to Alarcón's house. Matt explains to Kate that she was asked to join the task force only because CIA cannot operate in the United States unless “assisting” another federal agency; her role is simply to provide legal cover. This is a bizarre take on Executive Order 12333, but plot holes are numerous here. Do you really need to stage a firefight as a diversion to get Alejandro into Mexico? And since the waterboarding of the prisoner produced Alarcón's location, why did Gillick need to follow Diaz to the house?

At the tunnel Kate tries to arrest Alejandro, but he shoots her in her body armor and escapes. Matt explains that the overall US counternarcotics strategy is to restore the dominance of the Medellín cartel. Given American demand for narcotics, the drug business is going to con-

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tinue, and putting it all under a single cartel will end the collateral death and violence on both sides of the border. We learn that Alejandro's wife and daughter were killed on Alarcón's orders. Alejandro kills Alarcón and his wife and children, but it is not clear whether this is a matter of personal revenge or part of the Medellín strategy.

The ending is a stretch, even for a conspiracy story. Alejandro threatens to kill Kate if she doesn't sign a paper

acknowledging that all the actions of the task force were legal and proper, and she signs. She has an opportunity to kill Alejandro, but passes. She is emotionally shattered, and it is unlikely we will see her character in the sequel, which will focus on the Alejandro character. The film has been nominated for Oscars for cinematography and sound editing.

