

# intelligence in public media

## Two Streaming TV Series: *The Agency* and *The Day of Jackal* Reviewed by Resolute Lee



### *The Agency: Central Intelligence*

(10 episodes, streamed on Paramount Plus, 2025)

Whispers of John le Carré abound in this emotionally contemplative series that serves as a compelling exploration into the psychological aspects of espionage. *The Agency* is character-driven storytelling woven in threads of



human frailty; frayed individuals threaten to unravel at the slightest pull. An adaptation of Eric Rochant's French series *The Bureau*, the series is thoroughly entertaining.

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## *The Agency: Central Intelligence*

With a talented ensemble cast, including Michael Fassbender as the enigmatic Martian, the show explores the complexities of espionage and the blurred lines between identity and deception.

The series begins with the asocial Martian, a non-official cover officer, being thrust back into his true identity, after stepping off a black jet before being swept away to a desolate safe house under the cover of night. The next morning, Martian is in London after an unexpected exfiltration from a six-year undercover operation in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and is now forced to navigate a complex web of relationships and obligations. He must reconnect with his teenage daughter Poppy (India Fowler); come to terms with the loss of Sami (Jodie Turner-Smith), whom he left behind in Ethiopia; and respond to an emergent crisis in London, when a CIA asset suddenly goes missing in Belarus. Meanwhile, Martian is being surveilled by his own agency in a post-operation protocol designed to assist Martian's reintegration.

*The Agency* is analytic, striking a blend of exposition and silence that allows scenes to unfold with emotion and imagery, absent words or over explanation. Fassbender's untethered intensity is veiled beneath a fraying façade of calm as he guides CIA station colleagues through a perilous agent recovery operation. Martian navigates the professional obstacles with ease, while his personal life unravels in the shadows, or so he believes. In actuality the surveillance he's been under intercedes at key points, forcing Martian to employ his espionage tradecraft on his own agency as he maintains unauthorized contact with Sami, leaving the audience to wonder whether she was an asset, a lover, or an adversary.

Meanwhile, Martian's tradecraft does not go unnoticed. His boss, Deputy Chief of Station Henry, played by the versatile Jeffrey Wright, sees through

Martian's subterfuge, offering candid and thoughtful mentorship in an attempt to ease Martian's internal turmoil. The arrival of Dr. Blake (Harriett Sansom Harris), a psychologist sent from headquarters to evaluate Martian's mental health further confounds his suppression and intensifies the agency's intrusions into his life. This subplot culminates in tense interview where Martian posits, "you're not trying to help me, doctor. You're worried I may have somehow become sane," a profound moment of self-reflection that leaves Dr. Blake speechless.

The espionage tradecraft employed in the series is bounded within credulity and a heightened realism is achieved in scenes where the characters' emotions were a focal aspect while employing the tradecraft. For example, as Martian is organizing his alias and cover identification documents for return to the station, he decides to keep the cover driver's license, setting in motion a major plot line focused on maintaining a relationship with Sami even at peril to himself.

From the use of safe houses, to beaconing, surveillance, and countersurveillance techniques; the use of alias and cover identifications, including accountability of those documents; covert communications between assets and handlers, we are given more than a glimpse into the craft. The tradecraft and technology seemingly become tools used only to heighten the emotional aspects of what transpires on the screen. At a few points along the way the pacing slows with expanding subplots, which at first appear confusing or perhaps serve as red herrings. Though it becomes clear the plots are snapshots into world building, setting the stage for a follow-on season. *The Agency*, is a thoughtful depiction of the espionage genre, offering a story that is as much about the choices intelligence operatives' make as it is the psychological scars those choices leave behind. ■

## *The Day of the Jackal*

(10 Episodes, streamed on Peacock 2024–25.)

This is a stylishly reimagined and contemporary adaptation of Frederick Forsyth's 1971 novel, also a 1973 film. Written by Irish novelist and screenwriter Ronan Bennett, the series opens with immediate tension revealing the Jackal, aka Alex Duggan (Eddie Redmayne), cleverly disguised with prosthetics, muttering German before a mirror. Having just killed a man to assume his persona and thereby his access, the Jackal has laid the foundation for a far more complex follow-on operation. The assassination of a divisive politician with a bespoke rifle from a distance that is seemingly impossible.

*The Day of the Jackal* is a gripping series with Jason Bourne-esque action sequences and stunning cinematography. The Jackal's European globetrotting does border on distracting, though it highlights specific aspects of his expertise, tradecraft, and extensive target research. Redmayne delivers an engaging performance, crafting Forsyth's Jackal as a cold predator fraught with moral ambiguity and a detail-oriented perfectionism.

Bennett's Jackal is a dispassionate, process-driven predatory chameleon who excels at stalking his prey while using others, mostly unwittingly, to achieve the ends. Steeped in the use of alias, disguise, and an array of tradecraft skills, the Jackal extensively researches his targets and carries out his operations all while anticipating his adversaries almost prophetically. Though the Jackal does make mistakes along the way, it adds to the character's frailty. He is an anti-hero for whom this reviewer routed. At times throughout the series the Jackal is forced to adapt plans on the fly, relying on honed escape and evasion tactics and when necessary eliminating those who threaten his mission or secrecy, even the innocent.

The Jackal's skills in the dark arts are unveiled with each episode of the series as he decisively solves problems that arise in his mission to assassinate a high-profile tech philanthropist whose pending software release, called River, threatens to reveal how billionaires spend their money. Prompting the ire of at least one global oligarch who's hired the Jackal to assassinate the philanthropist before the software's release. As the Jackal moves further along his operational timeline he is drawn into a cat-and-mouse game with a dogged MI6 intelligence officer, Bianca (Lashana Lynch), who will stop at nothing to capture the elusive Jackal even if it leaves a trail of death in the wake. The two are presented as flawed characters, both driven by mission at all cost, regardless of the destruction to themselves and others.

While some viewers may find adapting the novel into a 10-part series as being a tad drawn out, doing so does allow for subplots and backstory focused on the Jackal's origins and his relationship with his wife and child, which is an aspect of the character not seen in previous renderings. These subplots add to the character's dimensionality, but make no mistake, the Jackal is a hired killer who offers no apologies for his chosen profession. A highlight in the series is a flashback exploring the Jackal's military sniper experience in Afghanistan. The flashback episode unveils Duggan's experience with the horrors of war, and becomes the defining moment that prompts his escape from the military and the dispassionate manner in which he executes it, leading him to the path of an assassin. In sum, *The Day of the Jackal* is an engaging series from start to finish. ■