



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on July 25, 2010

Salt: Taut and Accidentally Timely Spy Thriller

A good spy thriller should accomplish two things — it should thrill and it should intrigue. With taut action sequences and a well-written script, *Salt*, Angelina Jolie's latest foray into action, provides plenty of both.

The intrigue, in large part, is provided by the very strong premise of the movie. During the interrogation of a man who claims to be a Russian agent, Jolie's character, Evelyn Salt, is herself accused of being a Russian spy. The man, Orlov, also informs her that she will kill the Russian President during his attendance at the funeral of the recently deceased U.S. Vice President. Salt and her partner, Ted Winter, as played by Liev Schreiber, are at first incredulous — until, that is, Orlov escapes and Salt makes a break for it. What drives the plot forward from this point on is answering the question posited by the film's tag line, "Who is Salt?"



A strong premise alone, however, does not a fine film make. The greatest danger for a film of the spy thriller genre is that it devolves into overly complex story lines that require long-drawn-out explanations for the reasons and motives behind the action on the screen. At the same time, an overly simplistic plot will leave the audience's expectations of the spy genre unfulfilled. Kurt Wimmer has successfully penned a script that manages to walk that precarious line between confusing complexity and overly simplistic story by keeping the viewer questioning the answer to the question, "Who is Salt?" Just when we think we know who Salt is, we find out she isn't — unless, of course, she is. There is not a moment in the film that the plot is not being driven forward by its premise.

In the wrong hands, a script like *Salt's* could easily have been botched, but, luckily for the audience, director Phillip Noyce is no stranger to the thriller. His résumé includes classic thrillers such as the Harrison Ford vehicles *Clear and Present Danger* and *Patriot Games*, and he has also previously directed Jolie in the mystery thriller, *The Bone Collector*. His expertise in the thriller genre is apparent in the frenetic pacing of *Salt*, which is important in keeping the audience from stopping long enough to realize that the majority of the action sequences come dangerously close to the absurd. In terms of the reality scale, they fall somewhere between an old James Bond film and the *Bourne* series.

The pacing of the film is also important in not allowing the viewer enough breathing room to decide whether or not the plot twists are buyable. By the time the twists come — and there are twists galore — one is inclined to buy the whole shebang just because it is a chance to breathe. Don't expect to take too many breaths though, because, lest we take the time to think too much about what we have just heard, *Salt* is off and running — and jumping and kicking and punching and shooting and driving cars off



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ledges and blowing things up with jury-rigged rocket launchers fashioned in minutes out of some household cleaning products and a fire extinguisher. Take a breath. And do it all again. That in a nutshell is the pacing of *Salt*.

Of course, this part was tailor made for Angelina Jolie — literally. The character of Salt was originally written as a male and, at one point, Tom Cruise was supposed to play Salt. When Cruise dropped out of the project, Wimmer re-wrote the script with Salt as a female with Jolie in mind. Jolie lives up to the compliment admirably. She manages to be strong, tough, and athletic, all the while retaining her femininity which is what this film needs to be a success. Otherwise we would have ended up with a weaker version of Tom Cruise and yet another re-boxed *Mission Impossible*. In the same way that Matt Damon is *Bourne*, Angelina Jolie is *Salt*.

While the film is certainly thrilling and intriguing in and of itself, much of the intrigue comes from how the film has accidentally been made very relevant. The film centers around the idea that Russian spies have been trained from childhood to infiltrate the United States and live amongst us, waiting years or decades for the perfect opportunity to strike. It is not that this idea should have ever been irrelevant, but that, due to either the complacency or the complicity of those in positions of influence, it is rarely ever spoken of. Recently, however, this eerie idea has been catapulted once again to the forefront of the U.S. psyche with the real discovery of [Russian spies in our midst](#).

But in case we missed it, Angelina Jolie actually attempted to [invite Russian spy](#) Anna Chapman (known as the “hot” one, for those keeping tabs) to the Moscow premiere of the film. There really is no doubt that this act was to cement the relevancy of the film in the minds of the public, but the prudence of cheapening real-life espionage by turning it into a publicity stunt is questionable at best.

This is one of my caveats with the film. Does sensationalizing Russian espionage cause the American public to become numb to the idea? Or will the re-villainizing of the Russians in film help to cement the idea in the mind of the American public? Only time will tell and it also has a lot to do with how other filmmakers portray the espionage landscape.

Others may add the caveat that the film is ridiculously over-the-top, but I found the film to be entertaining, intriguing, and thrilling. Make no mistake about it though — the key to watching *Salt* is to walk into the theater with a healthy dose of suspension of disbelief.



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