

SHADY BUSINESS ; SURE, THEY SHIELD YOU FROM APRIL SHOWERS, BUT HAVE YOU NOTICED HOW OFTEN UMBRELLAS ARE LINKED TO BLOODSHED?

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The umbrella, it should be said, has served us well.

Its deceptively simple design has guarded us from the elements and kept us dry for centuries. So it's no wonder that, from the red umbrella of the Travelers Insurance logo to the image of Mary Poppins floating gingerly to the streets of London, the image of the umbrella has become shorthand for comfort and protection.

But beware the umbrella. Beneath the twirling umbrella tops of a Busby Berkeley musical number exists a certain shadow world -- one where the umbrella plays a central role in assassinations, Cold War intrigue and other troubles.

As we make our way through April's showers, let's explore the shadier, more sinister side of the umbrella.

Along the timeline of dark moments in umbrella history is the 1978 assassination of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov. At a crowded bus stop in London, two men believed to be connected to the KGB and Bulgarian secret police used a modified umbrella to shoot a pellet filled with the poison ricin into Markov's leg. Four days later, he was dead. Scotland Yard still considers the case open.

A similar umbrella assassination plot unfolded in the mid-1980s by a hit squad of the South African government. Shipped in various packages to London, a poison dart-shooting umbrella was to be used in the assassination of two exiled African National Congress officials. But when assembled, the umbrella proved defective and was tossed into the Thames River without harming anyone, as the story goes.

A replica of the umbrella that killed Markov is one of the more popular attractions at the International Spy Museum in Washington. Peter Earnest, executive

director of the museum, said one reason the umbrella is so fascinating is that it combines reality with our pop culture-fed notions of espionage.

"If you ever go to a movie, a camera may focus on some object -- often it's a perfectly ordinary object, but the camera focuses on it for a reason," said Earnest, a retired CIA official. "It gives it an additional meaning. I think it's that sort of thing with the umbrella."

Perhaps the most scrutinized umbrella in history is the one that shows up on Abraham Zapruder's film of the John F. Kennedy assassination. In September 1978, Louis Steven Witt went before the House Select Committee on Assassinations to claim that he was the mysterious Umbrella Man -- the fellow near the grassy knoll as the Kennedy motorcade approaches. Just as shots are fired, the Umbrella Man (as he's known among assassination theorists) opens his umbrella and pumps it up and down. For years, his actions have been intensely debated. Why open an umbrella with no sign of rain?

Fifteen years after the event, Witt told the committee he brought the umbrella to heckle the president in what would seem an elaborate and rather arcane display of sarcasm. Witt even re-enacted his moves for the committee.

As is their nature, the conspiracy theorists don't buy it. A close inspection, they say, shows that the umbrella Witt showed to the committee has fewer spokes than the one on the film. The unofficial theories are that the umbrella shot a paralyzing dart at the president or that it was used as a signal to shooters. Down to detailed diagrams of how such an umbrella gun would have been designed, the matter of the Umbrella Man has become a minutely hypothesized episode in the assassination.

Not all umbrella dangers involve sinister intent. There are the run-of-the-mill hazards to pedestrian eyeballs on city streets on a rainy day. And it was by mishap that one of the greatest showcases of the umbrella turned tragic.

In 1991, the artist Christo covered a California hillside with 1,760 umbrellas, each almost 20 feet high. A strong wind uprooted one and killed a woman visiting the site. A few days later at a similar Christo exhibit in Japan, a worker was electrocuted while removing one of the umbrellas.

Perhaps more than anything else, it was the Cold War that lent an air of treacherousness to the umbrella. In the spy world, all objects are not necessarily what they appear. An entire genre has been built around this notion -- the TV shows "Inspector Gadget," "MacGyver" and, most recently, "24" being a few examples. And of all the seemingly mundane objects hiding some nefarious

capability, the umbrella is at the top of the list.

James Bond had an umbrella outfitted with spikes that spun around when exposed to water.

John Steed, the dapper agent in the English 1960s television series "The Avengers," used his ever-present umbrella as both a mod accessory and fighting tool.

And if there's an antithesis to Mary Poppins, it would be Batman's archenemy the Penguin. He, too, can fly with an umbrella, but he also uses it to hypnotize victims and shoot poison gas. And in the "Resident Evil" movies and video games, all malice arises from the ubiquitous Umbrella Corporation, replete with an umbrella logo.

Harvey Molotch, a professor of sociology at New York University, said the umbrella's dark appeal has a lot to do with paradox, the weaponization of a device originally designed to protect.

"One trick (almost in the magician's sense) is to `convert' the most ordinary of objects, including those with a protection aura, into a weapon," he said in an e-mail. "So the umbrella works wonders. It is `above suspicion,' but can be made lethal. Even more lethal than a gun, because it `passes' as the mundane. And its theatrical-narrative value rises because of that."

[Illustration]

ILLUSTRATION: COLOR PHOTO 1-2: (B&W), WOLFGANG VOLZ (ABOVE), INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM (BELOW); Caption: PHOTO 1-2: CHRISTO'S umbrellas in Japan and the United States in 1991 led to two accidental deaths. Below, a replica of the umbrella gun used to fire a poison pellet into Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in 1978.