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WHORES AND ANGELS OF OUR STRIVING SELVES: THE COLD WAR FILMS OF JOHN LE CARRÉ, THEN AND NOW

Eric J. Morgan

While the cold war era of clandestine operations and secretive governments has been over for more than 20 years, critiques of Western intelligence practices and the amorality of Western governments remain prevalent in our modern society. This essay examines the screen adaptations of two of John le Carré's most prominent literary works – The Spy Who Came in from the Cold and Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy – with both exploring the depths of the cold war, though through two very different lenses. While nearly a half-century separate these two films, both The Spy Who Came in from the Cold and Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy offer strong critiques of the Western intelligence establishment and probe the morality and efficacy of espionage during the cold war era. Through their dark and antiheroic depictions of the Western intelligence community, these films provide alternative visions to the often patriotic fare of Hollywood, and Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy in particular offers an opportunity to look back and reflect upon the cold war from the perspective of today, where the contested morality, secrecy, and accountability of espionage and intelligence within democratic societies remains as controversial as ever.

It's the oldest question of all, George. Who can spy on the spies?

– Oliver Lacon in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*¹

And the ideologies trailed after these impossible events like condemned prisoners, as ideologies do when they've had their day. Because they have no heart of their own. They're the whores and angels of our striving selves.

– John Carré²

Correspondence to: Eric J. Morgan, Democracy and Justice Studies, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, 2420 Nicolet Dr., Green Bay, WI 54311, USA. E-mail: morgane@uwgb.edu

We begin in complete darkness. The 2011 adaptation of John le Carré's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* opens with a black screen and the haunting sounds of Jussi Björling's 'Land, du välsignade' as Control, the chief of the Circus – le Carré's *nom de guerre* for the highest echelons of the British Secret Intelligence Service – asks his agent, Jim Prideaux, in a rasping, suspicious voice, 'You weren't followed?' After Prideaux responds, Control continues, 'Trust no one, Jim, especially not in the mainstream.' Control's paranoid warning epitomizes the imagined spy world of author John le Carré, whose caustic worldview permeates his antiheroic fiction. The themes of paranoia and distrust dominate both *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and the film adaptation of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, released in 1965. This essay examines two of le Carré's most prominent literary works adapted for the screen, with both exploring the depths of the cold war, though through different lenses. While nearly a half-century separate these two films, both *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* offer strong critiques of the Western intelligence establishment and probe the morality and efficacy of espionage during the cold war era. Both films focus on double agents and their pursuers, creating labyrinthine wildernesses of mirrors that force viewers to confront the hypocrisies of the West's cold war and, ultimately, Western society itself. As le Carré reflected in a 1979 interview,

There is a constant moral ambiguity as there is in most things in our lives. It resides in the basic paradox that we are in the process of doing things in defense of our society which may very well produce a society which is not worth defending; we're constantly asking ourselves what is the price we can pay in order to preserve a society, yet what sort of society is preservable?³

Through their critiques of the Western intelligence community, these films provide alternative visions to the often patriotic fare of Hollywood, and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* in particular offers an opportunity to look back and reflect upon the cold war from today's perspective, where the contested morality, secrecy, and accountability of espionage and intelligence within democratic societies remains as controversial as ever.⁴

'A Burnt-Out Case'

Born as David John Moore Cornwell in 1931, John le Carré endured a difficult childhood. He was abandoned by his mother at the age of five and then raised by his huckster father, Ronnie, who had been imprisoned for fraud and was often in debt. Le Carré attended various English public schools before studying foreign languages at the University of Bern in Switzerland, and subsequently worked for both MI5 and MI6. During his tenure at MI6, le Carré published two novels, *Call for the Dead* and *A Murder of Quality*, before *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was published in 1963.⁵ An immediate international critical and popular success, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* allowed le Carré to leave British intelligence the following year to become a full-time writer.

Rather than portraying spies as glamorous or heroic as many of his literary contemporaries, such as Ian Fleming, did in their works, le Carré presents a pessimistic portrayal of the world of espionage and the cold war. The novel's main character, Alec Leamas, a British field agent in charge of espionage in East Germany, provides a dark and brooding foil to James Bond. Le Carré despised Fleming's dashing spy, a man 'with the charms of super cars, super and expendable girls, with everything which in artistic terms replaces love or emotion.' To le Carré, Bond's world is a 'pretty accurate reflection of some of the worst things in western society.' Le Carré instead tried to 'remake a figure who was involved in the dilemma of our time: that we cannot continue with the war epic.' The West no longer had a real enemy, rather

an ideology instead with which we must come to terms, and it seemed to me that the western dilemma of the small man is that the institutions we create to combat the ideology to fight the Cold War are getting so big that the individual himself is losing his identity in our society.⁶

Thus *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* commences with Alec Leamas, having lost his last agent in East Germany, suffering burnout from his work in West Berlin and ready to retire. Before doing so, however, Leamas is recruited for one last mission to bring down Hans-Dieter Mundt, the head of East German Intelligence.

In 1965, American director Martin Ritt adapted le Carré's novel for the big screen. Ritt, who was born in New York City in 1914, grew up amidst the Great Depression, an experience that shaped his artistic worldview, which strove to shed light upon inequality and various injustices in the USA. Ritt worked as part of the Works Progress Administration, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's most prominent New Deal programs, as a playwright for the Federal Theater Project. He moved on to work in television as an actor, director, and producer, but was blacklisted during the McCarthy era.⁷ Afterwards, Ritt transitioned into feature films, with his directorial debut, *Edge of the City* (1957), emphasizing issues that Ritt would return to time and again throughout his career, including racism, corruption, and mistrust of government. In his adaptation of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Ritt accentuated the moral questions at the heart of le Carré's novel, leading the viewer deep into the quagmire of loyalty and betrayal that le Carré had so expertly crafted. As film critic Michael Sragow puts it on the notes accompanying the DVD version of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, the movie 'follows the eternal question of whether ends can justify means to a nightmare conclusion: here, awful means alter virtuous ends.'⁸

This view is accentuated early in the film when Leamas meets with Control, the head of the Circus, after returning to London from East Germany. Control tells the clearly exhausted Leamas that he wants him to stay 'out in the cold' a little longer. Control then articulates the philosophy of justifying terrible means, stating,

Our work, as I understand it, is based on a single assumption that the West is never going to be the aggressor. Thus, we do disagreeable things, but we're defensive. Our policies are peaceful, but our methods can't afford to be less ruthless than those of the opposition, can they?

Control then pauses, and reflects, almost to himself,

I'd say, since the war, our methods – our techniques, that is – and those of the communists have become very much the same. I mean, occasionally we have to do wicked things, very wicked things indeed. But you can't be less wicked than your enemies simply because your government's policy's benevolent, can you?⁹

The critique of the Western intelligence establishment's cold war mentality is apparent. By embracing the same deceitful tactics of the enemy, the West's moral superiority has begun to erode, sacrificing its intrinsic values such as democracy and individuality. To both le Carré and Martin Ritt, little difference existed between the perceived enemy in the Soviet Union and the subterfuge of the governments of Britain and the USA. Indeed, the latter's affronts were perhaps even more threatening to the basic liberties of the West.

Ritt and his cinematographer, Oliver Morris, present *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* almost exclusively through the eyes of Leamas, who is gradually drawn into Control's Byzantine machinations. The viewer learns early on of Control's ability to manipulate Leamas' emotions, but Control's betrayal of Leamas is revealed more slowly. Control concocts a brilliant scheme that sees Leamas fall quickly from grace through a slide into alcoholism, assault, and violence followed by a brief stint in jail. Leamas' decline is highly orchestrated to attract communist suitors, which leads to his ultimate planned 'defection' to the East, all in an effort to implicate Mundt as a double agent. Following his apparent defection, Leamas is interrogated by Fiedler, Mundt's second-in-command, who already suspects that Mundt is a British agent. At the film's end, it is revealed that Control's delicate operation has actually been aimed against Fiedler in order to protect the Circus' true agent, none other than Hans-Dieter Mundt. At the climax of the film, Leamas realizes that he has been used and duped by Control to protect Mundt, who he thinks epitomizes of the amorality of the intelligence world. In a scene near the end of the movie that best exemplifies le Carré's criticism of both British intelligence and the cold war, Leamas rages at his girlfriend, Nan Perry. After she asks him, 'How can you turn the world upside down? What rules are you playing?,' Leamas replies in anger,

There's only one rule, expediency ... It was a foul, foul operation but it paid off. What the hell do you think spies are? Moral philosophers measuring everything they do against the word of God or Karl Marx? They're not! They're just a bunch of seedy, squalid bastards like me: little men, drunkards, queers, hen-pecked husbands, civil servants playing cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten little lives. Do you think they sit like monks in a cell, balancing right against wrong?¹⁰

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold finishes with arguably one of the most heart-breaking scenes in espionage cinema, the shocking betrayal of Leamas and Nan at the Berlin Wall.

Reviews of Ritt's film upon its release were largely positive. The *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther found it refreshing: 'After all the spy and mystery movies of a romantic and implausible nature that we have seen, it is great to

see one as realistic, and believable' as *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*.¹¹ Crowther thought the film's complicated plot would tax the brains of many cinema-goers but the hard work was worth it. Rather than having pretty girls and fancy gadgets, the film is 'full of elusive talk. It is full of involved explanations, cryptic references and droppings of names you must remember in order to follow the plot ... To keep up with what is happening, you have to listen, hard.'¹² Trade bible *Variety* agreed, calling the *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* 'an excellent contemporary espionage drama of the cold war which achieves solid impact via emphasis on human values, total absence of mechanical spy gimmickry, and perfectly controlled underplaying.'¹³ Writing in the *Cleveland Press*, critic Tony Mastroianni praised Ritt's reworking of le Carré's novel, which he felt was one of the most faithful book-to-film adaptations in recent memory. He also celebrated Richard Burton's portrayal of Alec Leamas, which he found 'one of subtle nuance. He underplays ... and in so doing comes up with a portrait of a man embittered and weary in both flesh and spirit.' Mastroianni concluded that the film was 'a drama of human values' that left the gimmickry of Bond behind, instead creating a human story that actually means something far more than the Bond films, which he criticized as 'fairy tales for adults.'¹⁴ *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* received two nominations at the 38th American Academy Awards, including Best Actor for Burton and Best Art Direction for black and white film.

Despite the critical praise, some professionals within the Western intelligence establishment found the film highly subversive. Several prominent practitioners of the craft were enthusiastic fans of spy novels and films during this era. Famously, Allen Dulles, Director of US Central Intelligence from 1953 to 1961, loved the spy genre, particularly Ian Fleming's novels and the companion films; Dulles even entered into a heartfelt correspondence with Fleming and was apparently strongly influenced by Bond's technology.¹⁵ But Richard Helms, the DCI from 1966 to 1973, 'detested' *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, decrying the book and film's moral ambiguity and cynicism. Helms believed that the differences between the West and communism were real and that the Soviet Union was a dangerous threat to global democracy. The cynical portrayals of Western espionage in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* had no place in the bitter cold war struggle, Helms argued, because the West's values were righteous and worth defending.¹⁶ Sir Dick White, the chief of MI6 from 1956 to 1968, shared Helms' view. 'John le Carré hasn't done us any favours,' White said to Helms over dinner sometime in the 1960s. 'He makes all intelligence officers look like philanderers and drunks. He's presenting a service without trust or loyalty, where agents are sacrificed and deceived without compunction.'¹⁷

Director Martin Ritt and his cinematographer, Oliver Morris, had filmed *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* in black and white and thereby established a film noir atmosphere and style. Le Carré himself felt this was 'somewhat overdone. I found it dragged a little. But most particularly the shots at realism were often very Hollywood, that we never really broke through the gritty side of it.'¹⁸ Morris, however, argued that the film could only have been shot in this way. 'I tried to make it look as downbeat and awful as possible,' Morris recalled.

They're awful characters in that they're sick people. I don't think I would have done it if it would have been in color. At that time, we were very restricted with what we could do with color. And certainly Technicolor would've been totally wrong for it. It wasn't that type of film.¹⁹

The *New York Times* agreed with Morris' assessment, commenting,

It looks as though Mr. Ritt has slipped in with a hand-held camera and started recording the movements of a British secret agent at the Berlin wall, and then followed him all the way on a long adventure of extraordinary complexity and peril, shooting all the while from hiding places, until he follows his man back to the wall for the final scene.²⁰

Beyond the cinematography, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* is memorable for the performances of actors Richard Burton, Claire Bloom, Cyril Cusack, and Oscar Werner, who plays the Jewish East German, Fiedler. Burton, a notable stage actor who made the often-difficult transition to film, is hypnotic as Leamas, the burnt-out operator. While le Carré preferred other actors – specifically Trevor Howard, who had achieved critical acclaim in the 1940s with *Brief Encounter* and *The Third Man* – and felt Burton's performance at times bordered on melodramatic, he admitted that 'there is something extraordinary in his performance.'²¹ Burton's portrayal of Leamas is magnetic, drawing the viewer into the spy's disillusioned world. Critic Michael Sragow believes that 'Burton brings heart as well as brains to Ritt's most sophisticated movie: here, for one brief shining moment, he became a Bogart for an age of disillusionment.' In many ways *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was a film ahead of its times. The mid-1960s marked the beginnings of the détente era between the USA and the Soviet Union, a period of thaw in the cold war struggle. The massive disillusionment from students and the New Left in the USA and Western Europe was also in its nascence, with the USA only just expanding its commitment to Vietnam in March of 1965.²² *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* offers an almost prophetic vision of the collapse of the cold war consensus and the widescale critiques of Western civilization and power structures that dominated the latter years of the 1960s and, particularly, the downtrodden 1970s, marking the slow decline of the West's hegemony. Historian Stephen Whitfield notes that *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* 'transmitted early signals of geopolitical change that even some dissident Americans were reluctant to accept. By blurring the moral categorizations of East and West and by questioning the very desirability of a clear-cut triumph,' the film was a 'harbinger of thaw.'²³

While Leamas is of an older generation than the burgeoning critics of the New Left, he remains a symbol of what the extremes of nationalism and secret government machinations can do to one's soul. Throughout the film, the viewer can see the pain in Richard Burton's face as Leamas takes on his last mission with great reluctance, understanding that he is nearly powerless to act autonomously within the bureaucratic nightmare of the intelligence establishment. His individuality has been subsumed by the dogmatic principles of the cold war. Only in Leamas' last moments, when he decides not to climb over the Berlin Wall and return to the West, does he achieve true autonomy and freedom, joining Nan, who has been shot and killed, in death. 'Go back to your own side, please, Mr. Leamas,' a

German voice commands Alec in the film's last line of dialog. But he does not have a side, and so he slowly climbs down the ladder to join Nan's lifeless body, when a shot rings out. Only in death is Leamas set free from the burdens of the amoral espionage world and the relentless cold war struggle, but he must sacrifice his life to gain that peace and release from the pain of having been a pawn of the West – a wicked thing indeed.

'There's a Rotten Apple, Jim. And We Have to Find It.'

In 1971, John le Carré published *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*, his first and only novel not inhabiting the world of espionage. The book – which was modeled on le Carré's complex relationship with Scottish author James Kennaway and his wife Susan after the destruction of le Carré's first marriage, to Allison Ann Veronica Sharp – was critically panned. Le Carré 'was extremely hurt' by the poor reception of *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*, and turned that pain into 'the most difficult book' he ever wrote.²⁴ Le Carré returned to form with *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, published in 1974. An incredibly complicated, labyrinthine tale, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* chronicles the quest of service retiree George Smiley – who appeared briefly in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* – to uncover a mole, or penetration agent, within the intelligence service known only as Gerald. Control, the manipulative chief who betrayed Alec Leamas, appears mainly in flashbacks, as he had died shortly after being sacked as head of the service. Before his death, Control had suspected a mole within the Circus and narrowed the suspects down to a list of five senior officials.

The underlying premise of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is based on the Cambridge Spy Ring, particularly the deception of Kim Philby, who served as the model for the novel's mole, Gerald.²⁵ 'I was determined,' le Carré wrote,

to describe something that in those days was still new to me, readers and perhaps, despite all the press revelations about the penetration of our secret services, still is even now: namely, the inside-out logic of a double-agent operation, and the sheer scale of the mayhem that can be visited on an enemy service when its intelligence-gathering efforts fall under the control of its opponent.²⁶

Philby and le Carré grew up under similar privileged circumstances and both had complicated relationships with their fathers. Philby's father, Harry Saint John, a noted Arabist, was a domineering yet distant father figure in Kim's life. Le Carré was drawn to Philby's story not necessarily in disgust, but rather because it felt familiar, perhaps even too close to his own experiences. Le Carré commented,

I felt, thinking about Philby and his father, and myself and my father, that there could have been a time when I, if properly spoken to by the right wise man or woman, could have been seduced into some kind of underground act of revenge against society.²⁷

Instead of taking Philby's path, however, le Carré had chosen to use fiction as his critique of espionage, capitalism, and the Western world. *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*

is not so much a condemnation of the West's amorality, as in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, rather a meditation on the Western intelligence world's ineptness and defeat by its enemies in Moscow.

Nearly 40 years after the novel's release and 20 years after the end of the cold war, Swede Tomas Alfredson, directed the first feature film adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. In 2008 Alfredson had directed *Let the Right One In*, a multi-award-winning romantic horror film featuring vampires. Alfredson had first visited England in 1972 as a young boy, and maintained 'very strong images and memories of that period. It's a very analog world compared to today.'²⁸ Alfredson's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, released in 2011, evokes that analog world via saturated colors of gray, brown, and burnt orange, all designed to capture the depressed nature of the 1970s. The British Empire is depicted as literally rusting, collapsing on itself. The decade's economic woes are prevalent throughout the film, with the Circus's civilian overseers admonishing the spy organization for keeping an expensive safe house for a secret operation. In a meeting with Percy Alleline and Roy Bland, two members of the Circus's inner sanctum (and possible moles), Oliver Lacon, the civilian overseer of the Circus, chastises, 'The whole thing's very unaccountable, isn't it?' Bland responds, 'So where do you propose we meet? In a café?' Lacon then says, 'The rents and rates on this house have doubled.' Bland shoots back, 'We spent millions on nuclear warheads. We're asking for a few thousand for a house. I wonder if Karla has the same problem with the Treasury at the Kremlin.'²⁹

When approached by executives about directing an adaptation of le Carré's challenging novel, Alfredson leapt at the opportunity. 'I had a relationship to the material for a long time because I read many of John le Carré's books,' Alfredson said. 'I thought [*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*] was a very moving piece about loyalty and friendship and the human cost that the soldiers of the cold war had to pay.'³⁰ The process of converting le Carré's novel to the screen 'began in a state of fear,' according to screenwriter Peter Straughan, who teamed with his wife Bridget O'Connor to pen the script. That fear, however was 'appropriate for entering a world characterized by paranoia and dread.' Le Carré encouraged Straughan and O'Connor to 'play with new ideas and structures,' moving away from the novel's construction if necessary. 'The really difficult part,' Straughan observed, 'was not fitting the plot into two hours but doing it without losing the tone; to give the film the same autumnal, melancholy pace and to give the script air and silence.'³¹ The director agreed. 'Since the book is like a maze,' Alfredson noted,

and it jumps back and forth in time, we had to distribute it in a different way.

The hardest part was creating images to replace dialogue that refers to people and faces, to see stuff happening instead of describing it.³²

At the beginning of the movie, Control, in his last days in charge of the Circus, is lured into sending an agent, Jim Prideaux, to Hungary to buy information from a supposed general with 'treasure' to offer. But the operation is blown, as Prideaux is shot, captured, interrogated, and tortured. Prideaux's capture leads to the ultimate sacking of both Control and his deputy, George Smiley, and Control dies of a heart attack soon afterwards. While Smiley successfully uncovers the mole, it transpires that both Control and the Circus had been deceived, with false

information tying the bureau in knots, and the lives of dozens of its agents throughout the world compromised. Control is ultimately defeated and emasculated by Karla – the mole’s Soviet operator – and Moscow Centre, and his failure and resultant demise is both quick and brutal personally and devastating to the Circus.

The enigmatic character of George Smiley is at the center of the film. While le Carré offered some criticism of Richard Burton’s portrayal of Alex Leamas in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, he was enthusiastic over Gary Oldman’s portrayal of George Smiley in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. Smiley had previously been played by renowned actor Sir Alec Guinness in the 1979 BBC television miniseries of *Tinker*. With seven one-hour episodes, the BBC series had more room to maneuver than the two-hour film – the plot is revealed and the characterization is developed more gradually than in Alfredson’s adaptation – and presented a far less bleak portrayal of the British Empire and the West. ‘We emptied the National Theatre for the first series,’ le Carré recalled, which was made ‘in a curious way, as a love story to a fading British establishment. Even the nastiest characters were in some way huggable. Everybody loved that; it was a very English document.’ However, le Carré noted, ‘when you come to make this movie [in 2011], it isn’t there anymore. The ethic and affections have all shifted. This has to be a much tougher thing, with a great deal less sentiment.’³³ While le Carré had a close relationship with Alec Guinness and admired his memorable take on Smiley, he felt that Oldman’s performance makes the viewer ‘share the pain more. I think you share the danger of life, the danger of being who Smiley is. That is much more acute.’³⁴

On Smiley as a character, le Carré commented, ‘He has a romantic agenda that he can never fulfill. He sees a lot and can do nothing about it. And seeing a lot is very painful.’³⁵ Oldman compared his Smiley with the earlier, television version, noting, ‘I think it’s a little sexier, a little crueler. There’s a bit of a sadistic side to George that we brought to the fore, and, I think, a sort of disenchantment. He’s a sort of disenchanted romantic.’³⁶ In Alfredson’s film, Smiley is in many ways an everyman. He is plainspoken, bespectacled, and unassuming. Yet he has a cunning intelligence and incredible memory. ‘Smiley has components which have mass appeal,’ le Carré argued.

He has a romantic agenda that he can never fulfill. He’s bad at some things, like bad at love. He’s made a fool of by his wife. He sees a lot and can do nothing about it. And seeing a lot is very painful. And he bears that pain. So he’s a secular Father Brown. He’s a very good listener. He’s a good guy to confess to. He has the wonderful resource of memory. He keeps for you. In that sense he’s like a lovely old dog. People find him a good companion.³⁷

In the movie, Smiley is drawn into Control’s last great endeavor as he works tirelessly to maneuver through the labyrinth created by Karla and Moscow Centre. Control’s paranoia, established at the film’s outset, is not the ravings of a sick man gone mad, but rather emblematic of the pervading mistrust wrought by Karla’s devious operation. Consequently, Smiley and the film overall ooze paranoia. In an early scene, Smiley is observed removing a small piece of wood from his flat’s front door, placed there to give Smiley advance warning of an intruder. Everyone

(including, according to Control, Smiley himself) is a suspect. Alfredson plays with the viewer's sense of reality, maintaining a constant mood of suspicion throughout the narrative. Near the end of the film, Toby Esterhase, another member of the Circus's inner sanctum, says to Smiley as his hunt for the mole is reaching a climax, 'Things aren't always what they seem, George. You should know that.'³⁸ Alfredson sought to accentuate this sense of foreboding. 'We tried to find ways of expressing paranoia through images and to make the audience feel like there is always a third person in the room,' the director reflected. 'That the camera is a voyeur, an uninvited stranger looking at things.'³⁹

When le Carré's novel was released in 1974, paranoia, particularly concerning the government, was rampant in both Britain and the USA. Various popular films of the time captured that strong sense of unease, including Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, both released in 1974, as well as Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor*, released in 1975, which paints a brutal portrait of the Central Intelligence Agency in the wake of the Watergate scandal.⁴⁰ Along with these paranoid thrillers – amongst the best films of the decade – real-world paranoia clouded politics in both Britain and the USA. Beyond Watergate and the revelation of various CIA misdeeds in the developing world, the hunt by counterintelligence chief James Angleton for a supposed mole within the CIA brought the world's foremost intelligence organization to a grinding, conspiratorial halt by the early 1970s, and the accusations by Peter Wright and others that former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was a Soviet agent confounded a deeper sense of mistrust in Britain.⁴¹ Commenting on the various misdeeds of both the British and American intelligence agencies in the 1960s and early 1970s, le Carré remarked, 'Angleton was wrong, but his effect on the CIA was as disastrous as if he had been right. Both services would have done much less damage to their countries, moral and financial, had they simply been disbanded.'⁴²

Along with paranoia, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* also critiques Britain's nostalgia for its once great past. 'In my day,' le Carré noted in a 2011 interview, 'MI6 ... stank of wartime nostalgia. People were defined by secret cachet.'⁴³ In the course of his investigations through the film, George Smiley meets with Connie Sachs, a former colleague at the Circus who was also forced into retirement. As they are reminiscing about their lives, Connie recalls how everyone she cared about in the Circus had begun their service during the Second World War. 'That was a good time, George,' Connie says. 'It was the war, Connie,' George replies. Connie shoots back, 'A real war. Englishmen could be proud then.'⁴⁴ Connie's jab at the cold war and the decline of the West echoes the earlier criticism from director Martin Ritt in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* that the cold war was not only an illusion but also one not worth fighting. While the enemy had been clear in the World War II, the enemy of the cold war is revealed not to be the specter of communism, but rather the West itself. Ironically it was the peoples of Eastern Europe who ended the cold war, le Carré, later argued, not the Western intelligence organizations. In his 1990 novel, *The Silent Pilgrim*, Smiley observes,

I never saw institutions as being worthy of their parts, or policies as much other than excuses for not feeling. *Man*, not the mass, is what our calling is about. It was *man* who ended the Cold War in case you didn't notice ... Not

even Western man either, as it happened, but our sworn enemy in the East, who went into the streets, faced the bullets and the batons and said: we've had enough. It was *their* emperor, not ours, who had the nerve to mount the rostrum and declare he had no clothes.⁴⁵

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy garnered largely positive reviews upon its release Oldman's performance in particular received high praise. Steven Rea of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, 'Just watching Gary Oldman and his trenchcoated brethren March down the damp, ill-lit streets of cold war London is enough to make you shiver.'⁴⁶ Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* agreed, calling the film 'a pleurably sly and involving puzzler – a mystery about mysteries within mysteries.'⁴⁷ Some critics, while praising the film's apparent realism and grungy look, were confused by its complicated plot. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* 'enjoyed the film's look and feel, the perfectly modulated performances, and the whole tawdry world of spy and counterspy, which must be among the world's most dispiriting occupations,' but found himself lost amidst the convoluted allusions, characters, and plot.⁴⁸ *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* collected dozens of film awards, including the BAFTA Award for Best Adapted Screenplay and Outstanding British Film, and was honored with three Academy Award nominations for Best Actor, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Original Score.

'We've given up far too many freedoms in order to be free.'

In both the book and film versions of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Control justifies the Circus's use of morally dubious operations by way of the classic Machiavellian presumption of worthy ends legitimizing questionable means. Throughout the cold war struggle, the intelligence establishments of both Britain and the USA consistently held this philosophy as unwavering truth, an idea that John le Carré vehemently disagreed with. Twenty years after the end of the ideological battle between the East and West, while the world's major geostrategic players and perceived enemies have changed, we still live in a world of questionable intelligence services and disturbing erosions of privacy and personal freedoms. Indeed the first decades of the twenty-first century bear a remarkable resemblance to the 1970s, the setting for *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. A prolonged foreign war for the USA, a troubled global economy, and revelations of government scandal clearly piqued interest in returning to le Carré's cold war world. In a 2003 essay in *The Times* newspaper entitled 'The United States of America Has Gone Mad,' le Carré seethed: 'America has entered one of its periods of historical madness, but this is the worst I can remember: worse than McCarthyism, worse than the Bay of Pigs and in the long term potentially more disastrous than the Vietnam War.' He concluded,

the freedoms that have made America the envy of the world are being systematically eroded. The combination of compliant US media and vested corporate interests is once more ensuring that a debate that should be ringing out in every town square is confined to the loftier columns of the East Coast press.⁴⁹

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy's overt paranoia echoes le Carré's concerns, and Tomas Alfredson's adaptation was made all the more poignant by the various espionage scandals that had recently emerged, from Wikileaks to Edward Snowden and the revelations of the National Security Agency's domestic spying program. When le Carré's novel was released in 1974, Americans were particularly entranced by the Watergate crisis, the revelations of the Church and Pike committees in Congress, and further investigations by journalists and others that revealed the dark side of the US government. The new adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* reminds us in blunt terms that such problems have far from disappeared in our modern society and that we have a right to be suspicious.

The film adaptations of both *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* offer searing critiques of the Western intelligence world as well as Western civilization itself, asking us a critical question to contemplate: Is the maintenance of our civilization worth the sacrifice of morality? As Bill Haydon, who is finally revealed as the Soviet mole in the Circus, admits at the end of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 'I had to pick a side, George ... the West has become ... so ugly, don't you think?'⁵⁰ That ugliness permeates throughout both films, which remain relevant today, as our trust in our elected leaders and Western governments has become deeply eroded. The cold war at the time of *The Spy Who Came from the Cold* as well the view from our present in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* reveals not so much the dangers of communism, but rather the precarious balance between national security and personal liberty. Le Carré acknowledges, however, that it is foolish to hold intelligence services to lofty moral standards. 'We cannot,' le Carré argues, 'judge our society by the quality of our secret services. That's absolutely absurd and dangerous.' At the same time, though, le Carré believes 'We should never think that spies are the solution. They're part of the problem ... You've got to have spies, but the important thing is that you're not enchanted by them. Use them and don't let them use you.'⁵¹ To le Carré, Martin Ritt, and Tomas Alfredson, the amorality of *Control* and the Circus violated the basic tenets of Western democratic society, which is why they feature as the focus of such poignant and angry works. For le Carré and these directors, the cold war was a dangerous and ultimately unnecessary conflict that led to the degradation of essential Western principles of democracy and accountability, eroding the very souls of Great Britain and the USA in the process. 'We've given up far too many freedoms in order to be free,' George Smiley laments in le Carré's 1990 novel, *The Secret Pilgrim*.

Now we've got to take them back ... So while you're out there striving loyally for the State, perhaps you'll do me a small favour and *lean on its pillars* from time to time. It's got a lot too big for its boots of late. It would be nice if you would cut it down to size.⁵²

Smiley's warnings at the dusk of the cold war remain relevant in our modern age, as the contested practices within our modern intelligence communities and the reach of Western governments, both dramatically critiqued in the cold war films of John le Carré, pose the same threats today.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Eric J. Morgan is an assistant professor of Democracy and Justice Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, where he teaches courses on modern US and African history. His scholarship has been featured in *Diplomatic History*, *Peace & Change*, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, *The History Teacher*, *Enterprise & Society*, *Passport: The SHAFR Review* and the *Dictionary of African Biography*.
