

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy: the Movie

Directed by Tomas Alfredson, screenplay by Bridget O'Connor and Peter Straughan, 2011

Reviewed by Michael Bradford and James Burrige

Portrayals of the profession of intelligence in popular culture matter because they influence the perceptions of the customers of intelligence, congressional overseers, and even new hires into the business. The performance and capabilities of intelligence officers are often measured against standards established by film directors and novelists, from Brian De Palma to Tom Clancy. Perhaps one of the most enduring renderings of the profession is John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, which, since it was published in 1974, has been adapted to television, film, and two BBC radio series. The most recent addition to this collection is the Tomas Alfredson-directed film, released last year.

This review aims to address three questions concerning this addition: How does the movie differ from the novel and the 1979 BBC miniseries? (The BBC production is such a faithful rendering of the book that in this review the two will be regarded as essentially one version of the story.) Does the film realistically portray the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS)—or any other major Western intelligence agency? Finally, is the movie likely to alter or reinforce popular perceptions of intelligence in general and CIA in particular?

In comparison with the book and miniseries, the film treats much more directly and stridently the presumed prevalence of the British class system, which provides its upper class privilege and immunity from scrutiny and judgment. In the film, Smiley and Prideaux (who suffered the most because of the mole's treachery) are aware on some level that Haydon is the culprit, but they are unable or unwilling to act on the knowledge. Haydon is the avatar of understated patriotism, the resident hero of the Circus (SIS). To suspect

him is to indict a venerated generation and the very class whose members had always formed the backbone of the Circus. The obvious comparison is to the British decision not to indict Anthony Blunt, or even to expose his treason, after his secret confession in 1964. For Smiley and his colleagues, the crime is deeply felt and debilitating, a faith-destroying shock deeper than the operational implications of Haydon's espionage on the institution.

Both treatments emphasize an SIS hope to reinvigorate a diminished relationship with US intelligence, although the means offered for doing so are cynical and involve the use of intelligence coming from the mole—intelligence purposely provided by his Soviet handlers as cover ("Witchcraft" from "Source Merlin"). Haydon described the material as follows: "It does occur to me that anyone taking this material to Washington could drive a very hard bargain in return. Indeed, if Merlin maintains the standard, I would venture to predict that we could buy anything there is to have in the American agency's shop."^a The novel and the TV series are free of the increasingly shrill anti-Americanism found in le Carré's later books. But the movie contains an illogical and gratuitous anti-American reference. When Smiley meets Karla in New Delhi around 1955, the Indians are holding him at the request of the British, in exchange for Indian access to the interrogation transcripts. Karla declines to be doubled or given a new life in England and, with no legal grounds to hold him, the British are forced to let him go. In the movie Smiley relates that "the Americans" got the Indians to torture Karla before Smiley's arrival. Why the Indians would even allow the United States access to Karla—much less pull out his fingerprints on its behalf—is left unexplained.

^a Le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, 137.

The homosexual relationship between Haydon and Prideaux, only hinted at in the book and the miniseries, is so explicit in the movie that one gets the impression that the director was afraid viewers would miss it. In a more puzzling change, Smiley's assistant Peter Guillam is also revealed to be gay (in the book and miniseries he is resolutely heterosexual). But there's no context, no follow-up, and no apparent significance to the revelation. It's difficult not to interpret this change and the insertion of the torture issue as gestures to political correctness.

An even more inexplicable change in the movie is Haydon's acquiescence in his death at the hands of Prideaux. In the original ending, Haydon is held and debriefed at a secure facility pending an exchange with the Russians—Haydon for several of the agents he betrayed. In his meetings with Smiley he is unrepentant and stonewalls about his recruitment and his tradecraft; he hates America and remains a true believer in Marxism, subjecting Smiley to an anticapitalist diatribe. Before Haydon can be traded, Prideaux infiltrates the compound and breaks his neck. In the movie Prideaux shoots him with a rifle in broad daylight. Haydon sees Prideaux aiming the rifle but makes no attempt to duck, effectively facilitating his own murder. Both treatments make explicit that the only thing Haydon feels any guilt about is his betrayal of Prideaux, and in both versions of the interrogation he rationalizes and justifies his behavior to Smiley. To make Haydon so plagued with guilt that he accepts his death as punishment for his actions may be typically Hollywood. Not only does it oversimplify the moral nuances of le Carré's world but subverts one of the basic themes of his work—moral equivalence, the idea that the West forfeited any claim to a higher morality by engaging in the same immoral acts. It's too complex to fully address here, but it's a major departure.

Does the movie accurately depict the day-to-day life of the SIS? The upper tier of the SIS is reduced to six managers: their personalities and interactions have to stand for the accessible human factor of an obviously large and complex organization. Strategic considerations and external politics are absent from their discussions. There are few hints about the size of SIS; at one point Smiley is told that the service has a total of only 600 assets worldwide (71). It stretches credu-

lity that these six men manage worldwide operations but play operational roles in the running of the asset Merlin or the dissemination of the Witchcraft product. The analogue would be CIA's second tier—the directors of the National Clandestine Service, the Directorate of Science and Technology, and the Directorate of Intelligence—meeting an asset, servicing a safe house, and briefing the product downtown. This organizational compression works very well at moving the story along in print, but images of senior executives sneaking through the shadows themselves is a stretch for anyone who works in the federal bureaucracy, much less in the Intelligence Community. They know the prevalent—and, after all, logical—tendency to delegate assignments down through the strata of skills and expertise.

The movie's staging of the Circus offices is wonderfully effective: a claustrophobic world of crowded bullpens, ancient escalators, narrow corridors, and creaking dumbwaiters. It evoked for these graying reviewers their first experiences at CIA and NSA respectively, when paper files dominated the landscape. To exit the Circus, Smiley, and his boss, Control, weave their way through a maze of stairways, courtyards, and corridors. The editing of the film makes it seem like an hour's journey. It is consistent with Kim Philby's description of SIS Headquarters: "A dingy building, a warren of wooden partitions and frosted glass window, served by an ancient lift."^a

The final intellectual stretch readers and viewers are asked to perform in each of the versions is in accepting that a major counterintelligence (CI) investigation could be carried out without the involvement—or even the knowledge—of CI professionals. The Cabinet Office official, Oliver Lacon, turns aside Smiley's suggestion to turn the inquiry over to MI5:

The Minister won't have that. You know perfectly well how he and Alleline feel about the competition. Rightly, too, if I may say so. A lot of ex-colonial administrators ploughing through Circus papers: you might as well bring in the Army to investigate the Navy.^b

When Smiley objects to the army-navy comparison, Lacon's response is that the minister would "rather live with a damp roof than see his castle pulled

^a James Hansen, "Headquarters Habituations of the British SIS," *Studies in Intelligence* 41, no. 2 (1997): 38.

^b Le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, 70.

down by outsiders.”^a All of these ostensible departures from reality are in the service of le Carré’s intricate and exquisite plotting, so we can readily overlook them.

Finally, how likely is the movie to influence or change public perceptions of the profession—if at all? Very little, we judge. First of all, it repeats the long-established theme of the lone wolves—Smiley and Guillam working alone, without the resources or legal authorities that come with the overt blessing of senior management. This is the model we’ve seen over and over in films and novels. The staff work that’s required to move the machinery of intelligence can’t compete with operations in terms of reader/viewer interest, and this movie simply reinforces that trend.

The film completely ignores the moral proposition so forcefully advocated by le Carré in most of his novels—that the West’s resort to immoral tactics and techniques (by governments and corporations) created a

state of moral equivalence. The film has definite heroes and villains—Smiley and Guillam and Prideaux versus the Russians, Haydon, and his dupes in the Circus. Treason is wrong, and it is duly punished—no ambiguity there. Contrast that with the end of the novel, where Smiley weighs Haydon’s motives and ends up not judging him: “Smiley shrugged it all aside, distrustful as ever of the standard shapes of human motive.”^b

The final reason the movie is unlikely to change public perceptions is its opacity. Except for intelligence professionals and le Carré aficionados, the film version is almost incomprehensible. *New York Times* film critic Terrence Rafferty wrote of le Carré that it was “as if he determined to make [his novels] movie-proof.”^c The Center for the Study of Intelligence offers a lecture to new CIA hires and others on the portrayal of CIA and the intelligence profession in popular culture. We don’t believe the film version of *Tinker, Tailor* will make the cut for inclusion in the session.



^a *Ibid.*, 71.

^b *Ibid.*, 353.

^c *New York Times*, 18 September 2011.