



[Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy](#)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) September 2011

Starring: Gary Oldman, Colin Firth and Tom Hardy. Directed by Tomas Alfredson

George Smiley [to Karla]: *We are not so very different, you and I. We've both spent our lives looking for the weaknesses in one another.*

The BBC are probably the best indicator of the approach of elitism that pollutes British society. If you look at the early years of TV, for example, you will see that the bosses of the corporation were on a mission to force their 'superior' tastes on the British viewing public, and when ITV came in they were generally seen as catering for the lower classes and their 'base' tastes.

In the words of David Byrne, it seemed that 'I was born in a house with the television always on'.

TV played a central role in shaping my tastes in all things cultural and especially around the late 70s and early 80s. It fostered an unhealthy obsession with the *Borgias*, thanks to the BBC series in 1981, when I thought that Oliver Cotton, playing Cesare, was so cool, standing on a tower and taking pot-shots with his crossbow at the Swiss Army mercenaries. But of the BBC series that stayed with me, it was the two adaptions of John le Carré's

Smiley's People

and

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

(for some reason the film title does away with the commas). These productions gave us a glimpse of what the British secret service was about as le Carré was very much an insider, like Ian Fleming. Unlike Fleming, le Carré's approach was a very realist one and though the clipped English vernacular could seem like a foreign language at times, we felt that we were being allowed to enter a world of a class of people we knew existed, but just didn't know who they were. They would become as familiar to us as our closest friends by the end of the book/series.

Le Carré was not interested in sexing up his subjects, although his characters could act in the most disgraceful and immoral ways, they were always human, and it was this approach that made the viewer/reader care about the individuals; whereas James Bond was making the world a safer place for us through cartoon sex and violence, the spies of le Carré made a Faustian pact with the British state and sold their souls 'for the greater good'.

The BBC series was packed with the cream of British thespians and none less so than Alec Guinness as George Smiley (perhaps his greatest role): the quiet and emotionally tortured ex-spy who is brought out of retirement to sort out the mess that the secret service found itself in. To appreciate le Carré's cold war novels, we need have some idea of the impact on the British intelligence organisations of the Cambridge Spies: Donald McLean; Guy Burgess; Harold 'Kim' Philby (thought to be the Bill Haydon character in the book/film) and Anthony Blunt, in the early 1960s.

When I heard that there was to be a remake of this classic I was puzzled: how would an audience today understand the idea of the world being divided into two identifiable and ideologically led camps: Western democracy/imperialism and Eastern communism, and moreover, how would a younger audience react to the moral certitude that is the basis for *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, in an age when even world leaders cannot provide anything worth believing in?



In a time where the portrayal of defence of the realm seems to require bombs, bullets and lots of shouting it is unique to see a spy film where people are not killed by guns or poison-tipped umbrellas or some unlikely gadget, but are easily despatched by sarcasm and innuendo.

Unlike the Bond films or the abysmal BBC series *Spooks*, the characters that populate *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* are not just spies they are also human beings.

But the values that were sought in characters 30 years ago is unlike those of today and it is to the director's credit that the character of Smiley is not portrayed as someone 'in denial', but is a more resolute individual who portrays the classic British trait of the 'stiff upper lip'.

It is impossible for people of a certain age not to compare this film to the BBC series and particularly how Gary Oldman portrays George Smiley. Alec Guinness seemed to float through the story. His face never once betraying a hint of emotion. Oldman seems to have learned from the master, as he keeps facial expressions to a minimum though perhaps suggests a more rounded human being than Guinness did.

One of the key scenes of the story is when Smiley is relating the story of his wife's adultery to Peter Guillam. We get a hint of the personal demons that haunt Smiley, but we also get to see why Smiley is so central to the story, for he also faces betrayal in his work and thus the lines between personal and professional life become blurred, without the situation feeling too clichéd.

Again when Smiley meets with Connie we see the lines blurred as Connie presents herself as nostalgic for the 'old ways' whilst Smiley seems to play devil's advocate by hinting that some of the old ways needed to be changed. The role of Connie is taken up by Kathy Burke and her approach is far more coarse than when the role was played by Beryl Reid in the TV series, who spoke in adianoeta, making the character sound, at once, characteristic of a spy and rather childish and pathetic.

And it is the portrayal of the characters, including Smiley, that seem to inform the feel of the film, making their belief in a better world seem rather pathetic. The beautiful camera work and the attention to detail of 1960s/70s Britain only seem to reinforce it.

One of the problems with *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is that it demands a lot of the viewer. Because there is such a large cast and so many incidents it is easy to become lost, trying to follow the plot; this was even true of the TV series. Tomas Alfredson has done a good job of making the story easier to follow by use of flashbacks as well as an ending (I'm not giving anything away here) that made me think of Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*.

The most memorable scene in that film is the finale where loose ends are being tidied up and the piano exit from Eric Clapton's

Layla

is played. Alfredson uses the same trick, to great effect, with Julio Iglesias doing a live version of

La Mer.

I think that Alfredson's direction of this story is brilliant. As with *Let The Right One In*, the film begins slowly, but once the characters have been introduced the plot picks up pace. As a period drama, the film is near flawless. The only quibble I have was in a scene near the beginning when one of the leading figures from the Circus (MI6) is requesting separate funding from a government minister, who goes on to object on the grounds of accountability. The dialogue seemed more akin to contemporary times than it does to a period when government didn't even bother to pay lip-service to the democratic process. But also what made it sound unrealistic is the fact that the funding was for a state agency, the secret service, who by its very nature, has to be unaccountable.

But that is a small quibble for a film that is quite extraordinary in that it manages to create

tension without recourse to pyrotechnics and clichés. There is some connection with *Let The right One In*

, in that Alfredson's direction portrays individuals on the extreme in a sensitive, and almost domestic, manner.

I have to admit to having my doubts about this film. I was never taken with Oldman as an actor and I doubted that these new thespians were up to task of filling the shoes of those that starred in the original TV series. Only John Hurt, who plays Control in the film, is of that elder school, but I found the acting to be first rate and every bit as good as the BBC production.

The relevance of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is not the same as it was and the book remains, alongside all of le Carré's Cold war novels, some of the best literature from the 20th Century. For me only *The Tailor of Panama* (filmed by John Boorman and starring Pierce Brosnan, in 2001) was as near the quality of the Cold War novels. *The Constant Gardener* was simply embarrassing, populist nonsense that pandered to the cheap thrills of conspiracy theory and anti-corporatism, tinged with Western patronising images of Africans.

Comparisons with the BBC series are, I think, justifiable. Although the plot of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is set in a certain historical period, the themes of loyalty, faith and a sense of purpose are universal. The success of the film lies, not so much with action but with the acting itself, and I think that this is why many of le Carré's novels have been turned into films: they place so many demands on all concerned and it becomes a challenge. The cast of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* provide us with a fantastic delivery of this story; equal to that of the TV series. It is the best film version of a le Carré story that I've seen since the *Spy Who Came In From The Cold*,

back in 1965 and I think it is one of the best British films made in a long time and one that is worth revisiting. Whilst it harks back to a period that may seem alien in this contemporary time of cartoon terrorism, it speaks to a newer generation of certain values, that, on the face of it, may seem foolish and old-fashioned, but on closer inspection tell us much about what it is to be human.

Writing credits: John le Carré (novel), Bridget O'Connor (screenplay), and Peter Straughan (screenplay)