

Le Carré's Marriage to Conscience

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From Thursday, September 27 to Wednesday, October 3, BAMcinématek screens seven film adaptations of John le Carré's novels.

“Oh yes, I hate Bond. I despise the short answer in the perfectly made world. I believe that most of us live in doubt and that is what animated the people who read my book, they felt ‘Well gosh, this is organized chaos, there is no solution.’ I never knew a solution; you are constantly trying. ... what fascinated people, there was I think a counter-market, if you can call it that, a counter-demand created by the saccharine picture of a perfect enemy, a perfect hero, layable girls, the magic-carpet world of big expense accounts and crashable Ferraris. Well, I lived at the right time and wrote at the right moment and Fleming as I say created a hunger which I was able to satisfy, not by design but by chance, and if I’m to analyse in retrospect what happened to me then, then I doff my hat to Fleming, of course. I hadn’t read Bond. It simply isn’t possible to compose a best-seller which breaks new ground out of a sort of intellectual notion of what is required by a public you’ve never met. It’s a one-time strike,” le Carré humbly stated in an interview in 1969 when asked about how his books had become so successful in a time when the espionage writing boom was seemingly coming to an end with Ian Fleming’s highly marketable and glamorous take on the spy world with his James Bond series (1953-1966).



"The Spy Who Came in from the Cold" (Martin Ritt, 1965)

John le Carré (né David John Moore Cornwell) was born in 1931 in Poole, England. Although recruited into Britain's Security Service MI-5 while studying modern languages at Oxford, he left in 1956 to teach for two years at Eton College. From 1959 to 1964 he was a member of the British Foreign Service where he served as Second Secretary in the British Embassy in Bonn, Germany, and then as a Political Consul in Hamburg, Germany. In 1961 he wrote his first novel, "Call for the Dead," and introduced his most famous character, George Smiley, into the public's collective consciousness. While James Bond was a suave, attractive, well-dressed Secret Intelligence Service officer for MI-6 with a taste for gambling and women, Smiley was a middle-aged, unattractive, badly dressed but intellectually brilliant MI-6 intelligence officer with a penchant for alcohol and failed relationships. As le Carré stated in an interview in 1974 about Smiley, "I like him as a character. I find it attractive that he's so terribly expert in the conduct of his professional life and such a fumbler in the conduct of his private life. Professionally he's illusionless, and yet in love he's the victim of self-deception." Adopting his now-famed nom de plume to conceal his identity, le Carré published his second novel in 1963, "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold." The public indeed responded to le Carré's raw and gritty take on the morally compromised and emotionally unsatisfying profession that espionage really is. The book was an instant bestseller, and le Carré quit his day job and turned to writing full-time. With twenty-two novels to his name and counting, le Carré is a tour de force not to be missed.

Cold War Intrigue

Directed by the American filmmaker Martin Ritt and emanating a stark coldness only possible with the black and white film of glistening wet roads by cinematographer Oswald Morris, and setting the bar for all subsequent film adaptations of le Carré's work, "**The Spy Who Came in from the Cold**" (1965) was based on le Carré's second novel (1963) of the same title. Starring an impeccably taut Richard Burton as the failed and supposedly demoted British secret agent Alec Leamas, the camera follows his every move with almost theatrical precision as German communists discover that he has information implicating a powerful East German intelligence officer as a paid informant of the British, and arrest him. Matters only worsen when Leamas's unsuspecting communist girlfriend Nan Perry (played by a wonderfully innocent and wide-eyed Claire Bloom) is called in to the hearings to testify on Leamas's knowledge. When it is eventually revealed that Leamas is still working as a

British agent, an innocent man is executed and Leamas is set free. Shocked, Perry scolds Leamas for committing murder and doing nothing to prevent it. In a now classic scene in which Burton and Bloom sit face to face in an escape car, their faces devouring the screen, Leamas fires back, baring his teeth, "What do you think spies are? They are a bunch of seedy squalid bastards like me, little drunkards, queers, henpecked husbands..." Only death can redeem them both from the cold.



"The Deadly Affair" (Sidney Lumet, 1966)

After the film adaptation of le Carré's second novel came the adaptation of his first, "Call from the Dead" (1961), in 1966 by American director Sidney Lumet and retitled "**The Deadly Affair**." Set against muted, saturated tones (the color film was pre-exposed to a controlled amount of light prior to shooting) and a sexy bossa-nova-infused jazz score by Quincy Jones, "The Deadly Affair" stars James Mason as secret agent Charles Dobbs (renamed from George Smiley) caught in between investigating the suspicious suicide of a Foreign Office Official and being double-crossed by his wife (a flirty, restless Harriet Andersson) and close colleague and friend (a handsome and collected Maximilian Schell). Dobbs amasses clues and ends up at the dead man's house, where his wife Elsa (Simone Signoret, in a matter-of-fact performance) has as many secrets as boxes strewn all over the house. Right before the mystery turns into a lame whodunit, Dobbs enlists the help of a retired police detective and together they pull out all the stops to uncover the sad, painful truth sitting all along on Dobbs's doorstep: those closest to him have duped him to satisfy their sexual and criminal needs.

The 1969 directorial debut of screenwriter Frank Pierson, "**The Looking Glass War**" was based on the 1965 novel of the same name. In need of an agent to validate the content of a blurry photograph, British Intelligence hires Leiser (Christopher Jones), a young handsome Polish defector, to penetrate East Germany at all costs. Chosen off the cuff and selected out of desperation, Leiser reluctantly agrees to undertake the mission in

exchange for his freedom. In a lovely set of contrasting intercut scenes, le Carré and Pierson remind us just how low intelligence officers will go to justify human sacrifice in the name of greedy games of power: we follow Leiser through his “road trip” as he is trained to fight, dotes on his old girlfriend, injures himself to save his life, kills out of fear, flirts with a girl on the way, and finally is exterminated like a wild animal.



“Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy” (2011)

The latest, and perhaps the most visually, intellectually, and emotionally riveting adaptation of all existing adaptations of John le Carré’s novels to hit the silver screen is **“Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy”** (2011) by the Swedish director Tomas Alfredson. Based on the 1974 novel of the same name and featuring an all-star ensemble cast who perform with impeccable precision, the film finds George Smiley (Gary Oldman, exercising a restraint so masterfully intense that while he swims his glasses don’t budge even a millimeter) and the head of British Intelligence find themselves being forced to retire after a botched operation with a British agent (Mark Strong) in Communist Hungary. With a new chief (Toby Jones) and his squad of allies (Colin Firth, Ciarán Hinds, and David Dencik) in place, tensions rise and sides are taken amidst the cramped rooms, bureaucratic routines, and damp melancholic earthy tones of greys, blues, greens, and browns. Everything moves with precision: the camera floats from the faces of all key players just as documents glide from lifts, to carts, to desks. As more characters (played by Benedict Cumberbatch, Tom Hardy, Stephen Graham, and Kathy Burke, among others) come into the picture, friendships become elusive, evidence disappears, a body appears, and the clouded skies of London close in on the search for the Soviet secret agent among the highest ranks of British Intelligence, with thrilling silence Alfredson breathes life into the somber, lonely, and deceptive inner world of each victim as the characters stab one another other in the back.

Post-Cold War: Traveling Abroad

Directed by the American filmmaker George Roy Hill, **“The Little Drummer Girl”** (1984) based on the 1983 book of the same title is a convoluted, rushed, bombing mess of double-crossings and betrayal amidst the Middle East. Charlie, a flop of an American actress, played to dull effect by an impassioned Diane Keaton, is

recruited as a double agent by Kurtz (Klaus Kinski, as nothing but a blank slate of a character), the chief of Israeli Intelligence, to infiltrate a Palestinian terrorist camp and kill one of its members. Charlie begins an arranged affair with her case officer, Joseph (Yorgo Voyagis), in order to lure the wanted terrorist into their territory but soon finds herself in a love triangle between the three. In the meantime, Charlie travels to a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon to be trained as a bomber. The stressful and amoral lifestyle eventually takes a toll on her and she suffers from a mental breakdown after completing her mission. How different *really* are the methods of the terrorists from the Intelligence Services? How *many* humans will the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cost? Le Carré's trademark critical moral voice hovers desperately in the dust, but all the eventful commotion makes it impossible to hear it loud and clear.



"The Tailor of Panama" (John Boorman, 2001)

"The Tailor of Panama" (2001), directed by the British filmmaker John Boorman and based on the 1996 novel of the same name, is a comedic romp of loose espionage helmed by Pierce Brosnan and Geoffrey Rush in the middle of Central America. Perhaps more of a sly satirical glance at the espionage genre than a clumsy dalliance with intrigue, the film goes where spy thrillers tend not to tread: there's no real trouble anywhere, the MI-6 spy in question was exiled for being sleazy, the epitome of Englishness is steered by none other than an ex-convict, and highly-sensitive information is none other than rubbish.

Surrounded by the hot days, nights, and girls of Panama, disgraced Andy Osnard (Pierce Brosnan, slick and quick, and incidentally a James Bond incarnate himself) has business in mind: get the scoop on who has control of the Panama Canal, deliver it to London, and back into the good graces of the Secret Intelligence Service he goes! In comes Harry Pendel (Geoffrey Rush, wonderfully fidgety and conniving at once) in his stuffy gentleman's club-type boutique, the avatar of Savile Row precision who doesn't have a grain of conviction in his bones. Together the two form a team of sorts; Andy keeps the cash flowing as long as Harry gives him the dirt on what his client, the President of Panama, plans to do with the canal. Both spin lies upon lies of nonsense, Harry to Andy and Andy to his boss until it all shrivels up in their faces. Life isn't *that* intriguing after all.



"The Constant Gardener" (2005)

Fresh from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro in "City of God" (2002) and "City of Men" (2002), the Brazilian filmmaker Fernando Meirelles directed "**The Constant Gardener**" in 2005 with cinematographer César Charlone. Based on the 2001 novel of the same title, the romantic drama tells the harrowing love story of shy British diplomat and horticulturist Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes, with spot-on timidity and reticent desperation) and his passionate activist wife, Tessa (Rachel Weisz, in a heroically raw, free-flowing performance), among the shantytowns of Kibera, Kenya. Using flashbacks, grand scenic shots of African flora and fauna, intimately imperfect over-exposed close-ups, and a saturated color palette to exquisite effect, Meirelles stitches together the highs and lows of the couple's relationship against the backdrop of smiling children, poverty, greed, and corporate scandal.

Upon hearing of his wife and her doctor friend's bizarre deaths far out in a desolate rural lot, a stunned Justin embarks on a mission to investigate just what happened. Slowly and resiliently, as he quietly tends to his flowers with utmost care, he discovers that Tessa and her colleague were murdered because they had uncovered the fraudulent experimentations of a giant pharmaceutical company and their fake tuberculosis drug. Traveling *incognito* to Germany and back, Justin finds at the top of the power hierarchy just who pulls the criminal shots: his very own boss at the British Foreign Office. But his cry for help comes too late. Although the film is at times soppy, Le Carré's classic subtextual bullet comes to the rescue as it rides steadfastly with the camera... until it executes Justin in a final gesture of self-revelation and reminds us that downright evil resides in men dressed to the nines in immaculate suits who will stop at nothing to have the good life.

No one sums up le Carré's motives better than he does himself: "I had to choose the world of spies because it illustrates what I had to say: The solitude of the designated victim." (1965)