

From Reverential to ‘Radical’ Adaptation

Reframing John le Carré as ‘Quality’ Television Brand from *A Perfect Spy* (BBC 2, 1987) to *The Night Manager* (BBC 1, 2016)

Dr Joseph Oldham, University of Hull

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Introduction

John le Carré is an author who has historically enjoyed a productive relationship with the BBC, primarily through an acclaimed trio of adaptations of his Cold War novels *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (BBC 2, 1979), *Smiley’s People* (BBC 2, 1982) and *A Perfect Spy* (BBC 2, 1987), produced and broadcast as part of the BBC’s classic serial strand. When, after a long hiatus, the BBC eventually screened a fourth le Carré adaptation, *The Night Manager* (BBC 1, 2016), much surrounding discourse referred back to these previous productions, positioning the new serial as a welcome reunion between two icons of British culture. [Jasper Rees in *The Telegraph*](#), for example, described how ‘when a novel by John le Carré makes its way onto the small screen, expectation reaches for the sky’. *Tinker Tailor* was usually positioned as setting a high bar for the new production to clear, along with (to a lesser extent) *Smiley’s People*, both cited by Rees as being ‘still the espionage dramas against which all contenders must be measured’. By comparison, *A Perfect Spy* was largely overlooked in such commentary. Despite being screened 29 years apart, however, the television adaptations of *A Perfect Spy* and *The Night Manager* have many elements in common. Both move on from the older generation represented by George Smiley in the earlier adaptations to a new focus on younger protagonists, in both cases figures with a chameleonic ability to assume different identities and adapt to match the expectations of others, thereby mastering complex webs of deception. On a production level, both were produced at times when the BBC, under threat from a Conservative government pursuing a strong free-market agenda and a new proliferation of commercial rivals, was looking for new successes by which to reassert its value in the broadcasting landscape.

This article will examine both serials to provide a new perspective on how le Carré’s authorial profile has been mobilised across two different ‘quality’ television movements, and what this reveals of the changing production cultures in which these adaptations were developed. Firstly, I argue that a *reverential* attitude towards the author’s work by *A Perfect Spy*, in line with trajectories in heritage drama over the 1980s, caused le Carré to slip from a bold and unconventional choice of contemporary author to adapt, to a more established and ‘safe’ option. Through fastidiously preserving the ostensible content of the book, the serial in fact adopted a formally conservative style, abandoning some of the more ambitious features that had contributed to the impact of *Tinker Tailor* eight years previously. This is followed by an analysis of *The Night Manager* which, by contrast, was positioned as a highly modern,

contemporary ‘quality’ drama, described by its production team as the ‘most *radical* ever’ le Carré dramatisation ([Brown, my emphasis](#)). This manifested in more significant narrative alterations, most notably eliminating the moral ambiguity which had long been a key characteristic of the author's work. I situate this against the increasingly globalised ‘quality’ television market, arguing that the loss of reverence is symptomatic of the declining power of the BBC in the production of prestige drama.

‘The Traditional Methods and Attitudes’: A *Perfect Spy* and the Limitations of the Reverential Adaptation

The relationship between the BBC and le Carré can be traced back to several early radio adaptations of his novels, but reached higher profile when it transferred to television at the end of the 1970s with the serialised adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. For le Carré, who had previously had mixed experiences with feature film adaptations, the BBC production provided an opportunity to see his work presented in a public service tradition which placed greater value upon the writer’s vision, and in a multiple-episode serial form which allowed his complex narrative to be given a more expansive treatment. For the BBC, it was also a turning point. Across the era of the broadcasting duopoly, the Corporation had assumed the role of cultural guardian in the area of high-quality literary adaptations in the programming strand known as the ‘classic serial’, viewing this as a key tenet of its public service mission. In the 1970s under a harsher economic climate the serial had grown in status as the main site of British television's ‘prestige’ drama, supplanting the declining single play, due to its greater ability to nurture audience loyalty in a competitive climate and its ability to attract buyers and co-production partners from overseas (especially the US). As Carl Gardner and John Wyver argued, an important repercussion was that television programmes began to take on the status of commodities ‘to be bought and sold on the open market as discrete objects, with a fixed exchange value’ (118-119). Produced as a classic serial with co-financing from Paramount Pictures, who distributed it in the US amongst local non-profit Public Broadcasting Service stations, *Tinker Tailor* proved a highly successful instance of this policy.

As the 1980s progressed, however, the ITV franchise-holder Granada Television had made notable incursions into this territory with lavish long-form ‘blockbuster’ adaptations of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (ITV, 1981) and Paul Scott’s ‘Raj Quartet’ novels as *The Jewel in the Crown* (ITV, 1984). Critics such as Robert Hewison have argued that *Brideshead*, with its romantic, nostalgic focus on an aristocratic elite at time shortly before the decline of the landowning class, can be positioned in the context of a growing ‘heritage industry’ which sought to reconstruct an aristocratic-reactionary ‘lost England’ complicit with the nationalist rhetoric of Thatcherite politics (51). Andrew Higson has grouped these serials into a wider ‘heritage cycle; alongside numerous high-profile British films with a similar focus released across the 1980s, beginning with *Chariots of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981) (1993). The BBC’s adaptation of *Tinker Tailor* can be positioned as a precursor to this cycle as, despite its contemporary setting, it is focused on an ageing generation of elite intelligence officers whose shared history is evoked through an extensive use of country houses and pastoral landscapes, features later typical of 1980s heritage dramas, although this

held in tension with more ‘modern’ features such as a formally-experimental non-chronological narrative and the bold move of adapting a modern author for a classic serial (Oldham 2013, 2017). By the 1980s, however, the huge success enjoyed by Granada in the area of prestige literary adaptations, at home and on the international market, threatened the notion that public service market intervention was necessary to preserve such programming on British television.

The BBC would continue to compete with prestige adaptations during the 1980s, most notably of Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (BBC 2, 1985) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* (BBC 2, 1985), as well as le Carré’s *Smiley’s People*, presented as a direct sequel to *Tinker Tailor*. Yet this period also saw a growing movement towards long-form serials written directly for the screen by noted television writers, often of a topical and politically-engaged nature such as Alan Bleasdale’s *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC 2, 1982) which explored the plight of a group of unemployed labourers from Liverpool. As the decade progressed, there were increasing moves to invest such dramas with high-end production resources equivalent to those of literary prestige serials. A key text here was *Edge of Darkness* (BBC 2, 1985) which used the conspiracy thriller genre to explore writer Troy Kennedy Martin’s anxieties concerning the rise of the nuclear state. Even as it employed a complex narrative style influenced by preceding two le Carré adaptations, this was a resolutely contemporary piece divorced from heritage tendencies of literary adaptations.

However, the BBC was experiencing a broader existential threat, with its publicly-funded status standing as antithetical to the free market ideals which the Thatcher government was assertively pursuing. In 1985 Thatcher established the Committee on the Financing of the BBC (Peacock Committee) to investigate the possibility of replacing the licence fee with commercial funding through advertising. This was a significant point of transition, as whilst all previous government-commissioned reports on broadcasting had accepted the fundamental centrality of public service values in broadcasting, in the midst of deliberations Steven Barnett and David Docherty argued that a lack of philosophical insight towards such values had allowed economic interests to define the debate (24). This was the context in which, in November 1985 the *Sunday Times* reported the BBC had purchased the rights to le Carré’s new novel, *A Perfect Spy*, which was not even due to be published until the following March.

With *A Perfect Spy* le Carré had again returned to the figure of Kim Philby, the ‘third man’ of the infamous Cambridge Five spy ring, whose exposure in 1963 had previously provided the inspiration for *Tinker Tailor*. However, whilst the previous handling of this topic had used the institutional traitor primarily as a device to explore the intelligence culture and the generation that had been betrayed, *A Perfect Spy* takes a very different approach, instead recounting the full life story of its fictional traitor Magnus Pym through flashbacks from a present timeframe in which he has been discovered and is psychologically unravelling. Through this the novel works to examine the roots and psychology of the traitor, attempting to provide a fuller account of his motives for betrayal. This novel perhaps stands as the culmination of a key theme that John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg trace through many of le Carré’s preceding Cold War novels, that of a crisis in the honourable gentleman hero of early spy novels from writers such as John Buchan:

The Cold War with Soviet Russia creates new and more complex problems which cannot effectively be dealt with by the traditional methods and attitudes... Those who still imagine that they live in the heroic tradition are unable to adapt to the new structures and attitudes. With Alec Leamas [*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, 1963] and Jerry Westerby [*The Honourable Schoolboy*, 1977], they share a traditional sense of honor which makes them reject the complex moral ambiguities of the Cold War. Their sense of right destroys them. Others, like Bill Haydon [*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, 1974], are lured into the excitement of betrayal as a substitute for the decay of the heroic tradition (181).

Pym follows the path previously take by Haydon, but a new depth is brought to this theme through *A Perfect Spy*'s strong autobiographical qualities, much of Pym's personal history bearing strong similarities to le Carré's own biography. Details from le Carré's life incorporated into Pym's story include the absence of his mother from an early age, a charismatic and emotionally exploitative father with criminal tendencies, time spent at an abusive prep school, an excursion to study languages at the University of Berne during which he was recruited by MI6 to spy on far-left student groups, work for the Intelligence Corps of the British Army in Austria during his national service, and finally full recruitment into MI6 (here fictionalised as 'the Firm'). Thereafter the life paths of author and protagonist diverge, as the fictional Pym becomes a longstanding, much-respected British intelligence officer, whilst maintaining a parallel secret life as a double agent working for Czech intelligence. This provided le Carré a therapeutic opportunity to explore his feeling that Philby 'took the path I might have taken if I'd been a different animal' (interviewed by Nigel Williams in *John le Carré: The Secret Centre*).

Also appearing in 1986, meanwhile, was another 'authored' prestige serial for television, this time of a more personal and intimate nature. Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (BBC 2, 1986) centred on the hospitalised mystery writer Philip E. Marlow (Michael Gambon), who continually drifts into a fantasy world of flashbacks to his childhood and the narrative of his own hardboiled detective novel in order to process his psychological issues. There are in fact are some striking parallels between le Carré's novel and *The Singing Detective*. In both, the protagonists go on a journey of self-discovery facilitated by writing, with Potter and le Carré illustrating the power of their profession as a means of working through traumas and repressions. Pym hides in a boarding house in a Devon coastal town after he has been exposed as a traitor, writing a series of letters to his son Tom, his wife Mary and his recruiter and mentor Jack Brotherhood, attempting to give an account of his life and to explain his treachery. In both stories, these acts of writing and remembering are utilised as devices for complex, non-linear storytelling that connects personal history to present interiority. Both are also semi-autobiographical, ambiguously blending details from the author's own life with fictional content and elements of genre fiction, a feature which attracted much commentary and celebration from critics. For le Carré, this was the culmination of a longstanding sense of intrigue around the author, who had been widely rumoured to possess a genuine background in intelligence ever since his popular breakthrough with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) but had only publicly confirmed this three years previously in 1983 (Sisman 434). Adapting *A Perfect Spy* for television the following year thus provided the BBC with an opportunity not only to return to an author whose work had given them an iconic drama success at the turn of the decade with *Tinker Tailor*, but also to explore this mythology with a more 'personal' drama, potentially recapturing some of the appeal of *The Singing Detective*.

The serial was commissioned by BBC Head of Drama Jonathan Powell, who had produced the two previous adaptations, whilst Arthur Hopcraft returned from *Tinker Tailor* to write the scripts. The scale of le Carré's novel, covering 55 years of European history with lengthy sequences set in Switzerland, Austria, Crete and the USA, necessitated high production values, and thus the serial featured two co-production partners. These were the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC's antipodean cousin which had also co-financed *The Singing Detective*, and Arts & Entertainment Network (A&E), a new American subscriber cable channel. The latter represented an early stage in the development of the pay-per-view market model for US 'quality' television which would ascend in subsequent decades, although at this time A&E was cultivating a prestige Anglophile identity in the vein of PBS. As a result, creative control rested with the BBC due to its high international reputation in producing such prestige drama (Weissmann 141-148).

Prior to the commencement of production, the Peacock Report was published on 19 May 1986. This provided a fundamental shift in articulating the value of British broadcasting in terms of liberal economics, recommending a long-term transition towards a 'sophisticated market system'. Whilst recommending the retention of the licence fee in the immediate future and thereby proving some respite for the BBC's public service tradition, it nonetheless recommended that the Corporation's longer-term viability would lie not according to the principle of universal access but instead as a pay-per-view subscription service when technological limitations had been overcome. The more immediate outcome, however, was its recommendation that the ITV franchises be put out to competitive tender (implemented in the 1990 Broadcasting Act) (HMSO 1986, see also O'Malley). This led to widespread public debate over the late 1980s as to how 'quality' in programming could be meaningfully upheld in a more commercially-driven broadcasting landscape, although as Charlotte Brunsdon observed in such discourse it was *Brideshead* and *Jewel* which were typically presented as the dominant reference points for 'quality' drama. She argued that these serials served as 'uncontroversial signifiers of quality mainly because they incorporate already established taste codes of literature, theatre, interior decoration, interpersonal relationships and nature', being 'formally unchallenging, while nevertheless replete with visual strategies that signify "art"' (86). Discourse aiming to challenge the policies of the Conservative government had itself, therefore, accepted a conservative definition of 'quality', signified by features such as literary adaptation, the casting of established actors from the English stage, visibly high production values, an alignment with upper-middle-class taste codes (in essence, heritage) and the potential for international sales, whilst more politically or formally challenging texts such as *Boys from the Blackstuff* or *The Singing Detective* seemed conspicuously overlooked.

By the late 1980s, therefore, heavily contested ideas of 'quality' drama presented differing possibilities for how this new adaptation could be approached. Was le Carré best positioned as a dynamic modern writer akin to Potter and Kennedy Martin whose work could fully embrace the aesthetic and narrative complexity of the contemporary 'authored' serial? Or was he a modern 'classic novelist' akin to Waugh and Scott whose works merited a more sedate, reverential approach? Previously *Tinker Tailor* had sat on a site of tension between these categories, but eight years on the options for presenting prestige drama seemed organised more sharply around this stark binary choice.

A comparison between *A Perfect Spy* and *The Singing Detective* is again instructive, this time considering how both stories were presented on television. *The Singing Detective* presents a non-linear interplay between not only present experience and memory but also reality and fantasy in order to mount a revelatory exploration through a troubled man's psychology. Hopcraft's screen adaptation of *A Perfect Spy*, however, takes a much more formally conservative approach by comparison to both the source novel and *The Singing Detective*, and the complex flashback structure is eliminated almost entirely. The first episode begins with a single scene set in the present, depicting Jack Brotherhood (Alan Howard) and Mary (Jane Booker) waiting outside the boarding house where the unseen protagonist is besieged, foreshadowing his fate in the final episode. The serial then skips back to Pym's childhood in 1932, thereafter unfolding entirely in chronological order with no interruptions from the present timeframe. Although the serial received widespread acclaim on transmission for features including acting, direction and dialogue, the narrative restructuring proved more divisive. On the one hand, Patrick Stoddart argued in the *Sunday Times* that it would be 'too confusing' to present the book's non-linear narrative faithfully on television. On the other, Andrew Hislop in *The Times* called it 'an unforgivable error – the more so if it was done to make things "easier" for the viewers.' Mark Lawson similarly wrote in *The Independent* that it was 'not an obvious improvement' and that 'an interlaced then-and-now narrative would have sated some of the impatience for the spying to begin'. Certainly the popular and critical success of *The Singing Detective* the previous year gives lie to the idea that the non-chronological narrative is somehow a 'literary' device unsuited to television. Indeed, eight years previously Hopcraft's own adaptation of *Tinker Tailor* had worked to recapture the novel's interplay between the past and present with a complex structure of extensive flashbacks, and far from harming audience response has often been claimed to have enhanced the fascination that the earlier adaptation had exercised over the national imagination.

The more basic framing flashback style is, however, similar to that found in many heritage dramas and films of the era, including *Brideshead* and *Chariots of Fire*. Indeed, considering the subject matter, another notable point of comparison is the heritage film adaptation of Julian Mitchell's play *Another Country* (Marek Kaniévská, 1984), which focuses on Guy Bennett (Rupert Everett), a character loosely inspired by Philby's fellow Cambridge Five member Guy Burgess, during his time at Eton College. The film version supplements the main narrative with a framing sequence in which Bennett is now a traitor in exile in Moscow, driven to re-examine his past by an interview with a journalist. This is a narrative approach which seems to be deployed as a marker of the 'literary' according to (by this time established) conventions of the heritage drama, flashbacks functioning less as a means to explore the complexities of memory and interiority (as in *The Singing Detective*) but instead to convey the feeling of nostalgia for lost places and objects in more visual terms (Higson 1993: 122-123). In following this model, *A Perfect Spy* is therefore more firmly located in the heritage tradition by comparison to previous BBC *le Carré* adaptations.

The heritage style is most evident in the opening four episodes of the serial which chronicle the childhood and formative years of Pym from 1932 to the present, moving through a variety of mid-20th century historical settings. Pym's on-screen upbringing functions essentially as a dramatisation of a *le Carré*'s own early experiences of being raised by a charismatic conman in dramatically varying economic circumstances, and this is visually

recreated through some striking contrasts. Early in the first episode, the child Pym (Jonathan & Nicholas Haley) is seen enjoying Christmas with his father Rick (Ray McNally), his mother Dot (Caroline John) and two of Rick's 'lovelies' amidst the splendid period surroundings of his family's large house, a setting which corresponds to the upper-middle-class tastes typical of many heritage dramas. To repurpose Hewison's description of *Brideshead*, the 'mere things' of the forties, such as country houses, buildings, vintage cars, steam trains, costumes and popular music, are very much on display (51). However, shortly afterwards, the police arrive to arrest Rick for his 'temporary liquidity problem' and repossess much of the furniture. Stripping away of the 'mere things', this highlights the precariousness of this privileged role, a theme that recurs over the serial.

Dot and Pym are then forced to seek refuge in the house of Dot's brother, the fearsome nonconformist minister Makepeace Watermaster (Iain Cuthbertson) who bullies and beats his young nephew. The depiction of childhood misery and hardship as a formative experience for adult achievements has overtones of the works of Charles Dickens, particularly through le Carré's fictionalisation of his past using flamboyant Dickensian character names (such as Uncle Makepeace, Syd Lemon and Mr Muspole). Dickens was, of course, a longstanding favourite of the BBC classic serial strand, a status long predating the more recent trend towards early 20th century works in 1980s heritage dramas. Hopcraft had himself previously scripted television adaptations of *Hard Times* (ITV, 1977) and the aforementioned 1985 *Bleak House*, suggesting a personal interest by the screenwriter in this kind of narrative. The 1977 *Hard Times*, with its gritty industrial locations and gloomy, shadowy lighting, had pioneered what Giddings and Selby describe as 'an entirely new way of "doing" Dickens (47), which would subsequently become standard. The filming of Makepeace's house in *A Perfect Spy* largely adopts the new Dickensian visual style, using it to illustrate the severity of the location. Similar juxtapositions between luxury and poverty recur across the early episodes of the serial depending upon Pym's circumstances.

Such imagery provides an effective backdrop against which to illustrate the chameleonic ability that Pym develops to move between these worlds and assume whatever role is required of him, and can also be connected to some of the ways in which the heritage argument has been complicated. Higson writes that 'the idea of heritage implies a sense of inheritance, but it is precisely that which is on the wane in these films', in particular noting the recurrence of a 'marked absence of strong father figures' (1993: 104). Pym, in fact, seems to suffer an excess of overbearing father figures in the form of Rick, Watermaster, Brotherhood and Axel (Rüdiger Weigang), his Czech controller with whom he shares the closest emotional bond, the contradictions between these inheritances proving ultimately destructive. As he states in a letter he composes in the final episode:

Pym quite frequently loved the Firm almost as much as he loved Axel... The Firm was home and school and court to him, even when he was betraying it. He really felt he had a lot to give it, just as he had a lot to give Axel. In his imagination, he saw himself with cellars full of nylons and black market chocolate, enough to see everybody right in every shortage.

Pym, it is indicated, had been driven throughout by a desire to please all those around him, including on each side of the Cold War divide, as apparently inspired by Rick's black market dealing during the Second World War.

Raphael Samuel has advocated a more expanded understanding of heritage than the aristocratic-reactionary model described by Hewison, arguing its potential for diversity and pluralism. Combining Samuel's approach with the theme of inheritance, Ian Goode suggests that heritage on television can be examined as a 'pattern of inheritances' whereby more personal sources of an inherited past, such as home, family and childhood can be positioned in relation to the more dominant understanding of national heritage. Across three documentaries by Alan Bennett, he describes the complex interaction of inheritances from Bennett's provincial Yorkshire upbringing to the conventional national heritage represented by Westminster Abbey. With its semi-autobiographical narrative of a journey through highly contrasting social milieus, *A Perfect Spy* can be similarly interpreted in terms of Pym's (and indeed le Carré's 'pattern of inheritances'). Indeed such an interpretation is more readily available here than with *Tinker Tailor*, where the experience an elite generation was more overtly positioned as a representing the nation in microcosm.

However, the chronological approach reveals its weaknesses as the serial progresses to depict adult life of Pym (Peter Egan) in the later episodes. As he enters the world of intelligence and adopts a life of treachery, he continues to be presented largely as a victim of various father figures. In effect, he remains in the mode of a Dickensian child throughout, subject to the machinations of surrounding adults, giving him a passivity which is challenging to make engaging on a visual medium such as television. Whilst dramatists such as Potter had long worked to explore 'non-naturalistic' ways to express character interiority, having dispensed with le Carré's equivalent device of using the letters to psychologise Pym in the context of his life story the televised *A Perfect Spy* hugely diminishes the central area in which the novel's Pym had displayed the most agency; the exploration of his own condition. Whilst, to a degree, the overall point of the story is how Pym's ability to play many roles masks his lack of a 'true' self, on-screen he is simultaneously too present to be a compelling enigma yet too underexplored in terms of interiority to engender much empathy. As the narrative arrives at the 1980s in Part Five and the parallel aesthetic pleasures of heritage spectacle fall away, this increasingly becomes a liability.

The sequence of Pym writing his letters (including the one quoted above) eventually appears in its 'correct' chronological placing in the final episode. Here the attempts of Jack and Mary to locate him and comprehend his double life are intercut with scenes of Pym writing in his boarding house room or strolling along the beach thoughtfully, whilst his voice is heard reading the letters in voice-over. Whilst he has been destroyed by his own contradictory inheritances, the only inheritance he has to pass on to his own son is explanations in which, due to his recurrent use of the third-person, reinforce the sense of inadequate passivity. Yet having lost their storytelling function and become divorced from the events and actions they seek to explain, such letters are left with an arguable redundancy. They seem to be included either due to the serial faithfully following the sequence of events in the novel (if not their structuring), in which case this is all that remains for Pym to do prior to his suicide as the police close in, or as a self-conscious performance of 'literariness', a common role played by letters in heritage drama (Higson 1993: 116). Either way, an ostensible faithfulness either to the novel or broader 'literary' values results in a climax that is unsatisfying in televisual terms.

It is difficult to avoid the sense that the decision to restructure *A Perfect Spy* along chronological lines for television reveals much about the BBC's changing attitude towards le Carré in the 1980s. Whilst in the late 1970s le Carré's *Tinker Tailor* could serve as the basis for a highly innovative drama that seized the nation's imagination through bold narrative and aesthetic approaches, by the late 1980s *A Perfect Spy* was largely subsumed by an established and more formally conservative heritage tradition. In the context of the combative broadcasting culture of the 1980s, therefore, le Carré had seemingly gone from bold, unconventional choice of author to adapt to a reassuring mainstay of the BBC drama, manifesting in an ultimately less compelling and 'safer' approach for adaptation. Perhaps this lies at the root of why *A Perfect Spy* has, in the long-term, been considerably marginalised by comparison to its predecessors. Indeed, despite his appreciation of the previous BBC adaptations, le Carré himself was apparently far less enthused on this occasion, later describing it in a letter to Guinness as 'embarrassing' and 'one of the unadulterated disasters of my professional life' (quoted in Sisman 449-450).

Over the next few years further proposals to adapt le Carré for television seemed ever more consumed by a sense of 'pastness', as attention turned to adapting previously unfilmed novels from the 1960s. At the time of *A Perfect Spy*'s transmission, Powell and Hopcraft indicated their interest in adapting his fifth novel *A Small Town in Germany* (1968), although this did not come to pass (Stoddart 72). A few years later, ITV company Thames Television produced an adaptation of le Carré's 1962 novel *A Murder of Quality* (ITV, 1991) starring Denholm Elliott as Smiley; this would transpire to be the last le Carré adaptation on television for 25 years. As a traditional English detective story with no espionage content set in the visually timeless space of a public school, this was arguably the ultimate containment of le Carré's *oeuvre* within the aesthetic priorities of heritage drama. It might be argued that British television was simply responding to how, as Sisman writes, 'it was often said that le Carré lost his subject when the Cold War ended' (478), yet through his concurrent novels le Carré himself was determined to refute this assumption and reassert his relevance to the new multi-polar world. His first post-Cold War novel, *The Night Manager* (1993), centred on another site of international intrigue he had identified as being of key relevance to the new geopolitical landscape, that of the international arms trade. Appropriately, this narrative would serve a similar function when it was adapted for British television 23 years later, the new serial serving to emphatically reverse the heritage trajectory that had increasingly been evident in the medium's engagements with le Carré over the 1980s and early 1990s.

The 'Most Radical' Le Carré Adaptation Ever Done: Contemporary 'Quality' and the Loss of Reverence in *The Night Manager* (BBC 1/AMC, 2016)

The television adaptation of *The Night Manager* proved an enormous contrast to the original trio of BBC le Carré adaptations, and indeed the context in which it was produced was profoundly different. This was, nonetheless, a landscape shaped by the legacy of the Peacock Report which had exercised increasing emphasis over policy of both Conservative and Labour governments over subsequent decades, providing the intellectual justification for a shift in conceptions of the value of broadcasting from public service to consumer sovereignty (O'Malley). One of the recommendations implemented in the 1990 Broadcasting Act was the

requirement that the BBC and ITV commission 25% of programming from independent producers, and over the 1990s the independent sector developed a reputation for producing much of British television's boldest and most innovative dramas, although initially power remained concentrated with large broadcaster-distributors such as the BBC who primarily funded programming and retained secondary distribution rights. A further legislative turning point was reached, however, with the 2003 UK Communications Act, 'which paved the way for independent producers to retain copyright ownership in programming and control secondary rights after first broadcast by commissioning public service broadcasters'. As independent producers increasingly expanded into their own distribution operations, power devolved from traditional broadcasters who increasingly became only one of multiple funding sources on internationally-viable programming (Steemers 739).

The 2000s also saw the wide adoption of digital television, such that by the end of the decade the majority of households in the UK were multichannel homes, and the growth of the internet as an alternative means of distribution, and thus the Peacock Report's vision of reinventing the BBC as a subscriber service had gained a new technical feasibility. In the US high-profile subscription channels such as HBO had come to specialise in a new generation of critically-acclaimed 'quality' drama, demonstrating a new means to make high-end drama economically feasible in a commercial context. By the 2010s many commentators perceived the UK's once world-leading television to have fallen behind in the increasingly globalised 'quality' television market; as le Carré himself put it, 'television drama these days, whether from the US or Scandinavia or, more rarely, from Britain, is scaling new heights' (2016). Thus when the Conservatives returned to power in 2010 as leading members of a coalition government, signalling a renewed emphasis on free-market ideals in British political culture, the BBC's mandate for 'universal' programming seemed more open to question than ever. In spite of the dramatically different circumstances, there is thus a loose parallel with the production of the original BBC le Carré adaptations, with the BBC struggling to reassert its relevance in an age when possibilities for producing high-end 'quality' drama had been shown viable through the commercial sector. It is therefore tempting to interpret *The Night Manager* as an instance of the BBC seizing an opportunity to reassert its value through returning to a prior area of success with the now-legendary Smiley serials, once again mobilising le Carré as a brand of public service television.

However, whilst the three previous le Carré adaptations had been very much 'in-house' productions by the BBC, *The Night Manager* was much more a product of the new landscape of increasingly empowered, internationally-operating independent production companies. The initial impetus to adapt the novel originated not with internal BBC staff, as in the late 1970s and 1980s, but with the Los Angeles-based production company The Ink Factory. Owned by le Carré's sons Simon and Stephen Cornwell, The Ink Factory was increasingly working to mine this personal connection, having already produced a feature film adaptation of the author's recent novel *A Most Wanted Man* (Anton Corbijn, 2014). It was The Ink Factory who secured the rights to the novel from Paramount, where they had resided since publication (and where several proposed feature film adaptations had fallen through). Before approaching any broadcaster, The Ink Factory recruited writer David Farr to work on his interpretation of the novel, and it was only once a package had been significantly developed that it was then offered to and taken up by the BBC. A more hands-off role by the

BBC was also evident in Cornwell's later claim that, at post-production stage, 'we didn't show the broadcasters a single episode of the show until we had all six' ([RTS](#)).

Furthermore, for The Ink Factory, international sales were of no less interest than the BBC's traditional adaptation audience, and through a transatlantic co-production arrangement *The Night Manager* also had a close relationship with the American 'quality' television movement. Contributing a third of its £20 million budget, the serial's key US distribution partner was subscription cable channel AMC who had achieved success with two of the most acclaimed 'quality' dramas of recent years, *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-15) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13) (Brown). In addition, The Ink Factory developed plans for a 'global rollout' of the serial in collaboration with International Management Group's sales arm. Sales were negotiated for major markets across Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Australia, such wide distribution noted as being 'crucial to financing the high-end production' (Littleton 2015).

The Night Manager, as noted above, was declared by its own production team to be the 'most radical ever' Le Carré dramatisation (Brown), subtly highlighting a sharp shift of priorities in adapting this author. The previous adaptations had emerged from the tradition of the classic serial, characterised by a valuation of literature and hence a fundamentally deferential attitude towards the original work. Even when formal experimentation on the page was muted on transfer to the screen, as with *A Perfect Spy*, the actual narrative events described in the novel remain largely preserved. This new 'radical' approach, by contrast, manifested in an unprecedented willingness, for a televised le Carré adaptation, to adapt the narrative content far more extensively in order to correspond with other priorities.

The narrative centres on Jonathan Pine (Tom Hiddleston), the titular night manager of a Zurich hotel, who is enlisted by a unit of British intelligence for a deep-cover operation to bring down the notorious international arms dealer Richard Oslow Roper (Hugh Laurie). Updated from the early 1990s setting of the novel to the present timeframe of the adaptation, *The Night Manager* was presented as an emphatically modern, contemporary television drama. Whilst the prior BBC le Carré adaptations had kept one foot in the past through their focus on a traditionally British elite culture, *The Night Manager* is instead set largely in the world of the international jet-setting super-rich, replacing the visual emphasis on fading national heritage in earlier adaptations with the exotic spaces of opulent hotels and luxury private villas around Europe and the Mediterranean. More specific changes made to the storyline included numerous altered locations, the replacement of the Colombian drug barons with whom Roper originally conducted his deals with Middle Eastern warlords, and the substitution of Roper's yacht as a primary setting with the less claustrophobic and more expansive setting of his private island and luxury villa. Attracting much comment in publicity was the decision to alter the gender of the Pine's handler, Leonard Burr, who was reworked into Angela Burr (Olivia Colman). In sharp contrast to the private dissatisfaction he expressed regarding *A Perfect Spy*, such changes won le Carré's very public approval, the author penning [an article for *The Guardian*](#) in which he indicated his understanding for the reasoning behind many of these changes and ranked the finished product amongst his favourite adaptations (alongside the BBC version of *Tinker Tailor*) (2016).

On the return of his work to television in the 21st century, therefore, le Carré had essentially managed to escape the masculine heritage bubble in which he had arguably become trapped around the end of the Cold War. To some extent, this dramatic shift can be seen as an extension of le Carré's own drive to update his work for the post-Cold War era, as since 1993 the original novel of *The Night Manager* had been followed up by nine other bestselling novels closely (and often polemically) engaged with changing geopolitical contexts. The adaptation fully embraces le Carré's post-Cold War geopolitical engagement and updates it even further. It takes the novel's opening flashback, in which Pine first discovers the illicit arms dealing of Roper whilst working as a hotel manager in Cairo, and sets it explicitly amidst the 2011 Egyptian revolution (still in progress at the time when Farr began work on the scripts), providing an evocative and topical backdrop to the first half of Episode 1. A sequence in Episode 5, meanwhile, sees Roper and Pine travel through a camp of refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war.

Yet despite its more strident claims to engage with contemporary 'issues', by comparison to earlier le Carré adaptations there is a certain simplicity to *The Night Manager*'s handling of such matters. Whilst le Carré's Cold War novels were haunted by anxieties of moral equivalence between East and West and typically lacked clear villains, Roper is presented as an unambiguously detestable and monstrous figure. This provides strong guidance for how the audience is to respond to other characters and scenarios, and a new moral simplicity is also particularly evident in how the serial presents its central protagonist. At the conclusion of Episode 1, questioned by Burr regarding his motive for becoming involved in her operation against Roper, Pine declares, 'If there's a man selling a private arsenal to an Egyptian crook and he's English, and you're English, and those weapons can cause a lot of pain to a lot of people, then you just do it.' Such a characterisation was a source of fascination for many critics, such as Rees who described Pine as 'the kind of dauntless English hero that they don't make the way they used to', whose 'ramrod spine and blue-eyed civility seemed custom-made for the role of a contemporary Sir Galahad come to rescue a weary world'. As an untrained agent from a privileged background, motivated into action by mixture of moral judgement and national self-identity rather than bureaucratic professionalism, Pine is in many ways a curious revival of the Buchanesque gentleman amateur, precisely the kind of figure whose crisis had been dramatised by le Carré throughout the Cold War, most definitively in *A Perfect Spy*.

Once he has gone undercover in Roper's camp, numerous characters whom Pine encounters comment on his ambiguous nature. In Episode 3, as he is still working to earn Roper's trust, Pine explains his refusal to drink and denies that he is a socialist. This prompts the arms dealer to remark, 'Fine, you don't drink, you're not pink. What are you?' To this, Pine offers no immediate response, setting for 'a free man' on Roper's prompting. In Episode 4, following their completion of an arms deal in Istanbul, Pine deflects Roper's enquiries about his sexual preferences. In an echo of the earlier exchange, Roper muses, 'So you don't drink, you don't screw. I'm not sure I can trust a man with no appetites.' Earlier in the same episode, Roper's mistress Jed (Elizabeth Debicki), with whom Pine is beginning a dangerous affair, asks him insistently, 'Who are you? You come into our lives, disrupt our balance, everyone's attracted to you. Who are you?' Again Pine offers no answer. In a parallel with Pym in *A Perfect Spy*, Pine is able to effortlessly adapt to be what other characters require of

him; a perfect agent for Burr, a confidant and associate for Roper and a lover and saviour for Jed. Unlike *A Perfect Spy*, however, the serial shows little interest in exploring the potential for internal emotional conflict on Pine's part. Indeed, the camera's gaze frequently aligns instead with that of the characters entranced by Pine, tending to linger on his body in long-shots and focus on his clear blue eyes in close-ups, thereby presenting his physicality as spectacle in moments when insight into his interiority is withheld.

If Pine is a revival of the traditional Buchanesque gentleman hero, Roper's Englishness is just as strongly emphasised (in contrast to the monstrous, foreign 'others' that had typically served as villains in Buchan's novels). Unlike Pine, however, his commitment is not to ethics and honour and but instead to the murderous excesses of the free-market economy, here presented as a seemingly monstrous aberration to the English psyche. Thus, even as the overseas settings see the elimination of English heritage imagery, an elite, privileged conception of Englishness remains the object of examination on a character level. The institutional complexity of *Tinker Tailor* and the psychological complexity of *A Perfect Spy* are replaced with a clearer binary opposition between the honourable and dishonourable Englishman, and the wider conflicts and crises of the geopolitical world serve largely as backdrop for the conflict between these two archetypes. The theme of inheritance also recurs within this mix as le Carré had originally imagined the relationship between Roper and Pine as a contest between father and son figures, and although the novel is a far less autobiographical work than *A Perfect Spy* Sisman suggests that a possible inspiration may have come from how the author had suspected his own father of 'trying to find an opening in the arms trade at the time of the Six Day War' (487). Farr arrived at a similar interpretation, describing Roper as being 'like a king desperately seeking an heir', this lying at the root of his fixation on Pine (RTS).

In fact, upon its initial UK broadcast, the serial was drawn into a growing cultural debate centred on issues of privileged inheritance, specifically regarding the increasing difficulty for anyone outside of an affluent background to start a career in acting. Of note was the fact that three of the leading actors, Hiddleston, Laurie and Hollander (playing Roper's henchman Major Lance 'Corky' Corkoran), had all attended the same elite prep school in Oxford, making *The Night Manager* seem a particularly potent symbol of phenomenon (Ramasmwamy).¹ Less visible but perhaps just as significant was the leading role in production played le Carré's privately-educated sons. Thus whilst le Carré, as noted, signalled his approval of the changes made to the story, his praise should perhaps be regarded as compromised given that a publicly negative verdict on the serial (as le Carré has been willing to provide in previous instances when adaptations have earned his dissatisfaction) may have carried real risks of damaging the professional prospects of his offspring. Even in the absence of heritage imagery, therefore, a sense of privileged inheritance remains present, now embodied in the leading actors and embedded in the production culture.

The implications of this emerge in the serial's most radical alternation from the source material; the complete transformation of the ending. Le Carré's novel concludes with one of his characteristically ambivalent and downbeat conclusions. Although Pine is able to escape

¹ An insightful discussion of this aspect of the serial was provided by Rosie White in her keynote paper at *Spies on British Screens* (Plymouth University, 17-19 June 2016).

with Jed and begin a new life with her, Roper succeeds in achieving his major arms deal, whilst the intelligence officers who had dedicated themselves to his downfall are all discredited by corrupt factions in the state apparatus. The television serial, however, discards much of the latter half of le Carré's novel, and the final two episodes are composed largely of new material written by Farr who believed that the original ending would not work for television due to the more 'passive' role it offered Pine (which had indeed been a problem with Pym in the televised *A Perfect Spy*, as argued above). Farr described his interpretation of the story as being 'a duel between two guys' which required a Western-style confrontation between Pine and Roper at the climax (RTS). The transformation goes far behind the need for a confrontation scene, however, as outcomes of the television serial are essentially all positive; Burr successfully outmanoeuvres the conspirators in British intelligence, Pine destroys the entire stock of weapons in Roper's sale, and Roper is kidnapped by his enraged business partners for what is strongly implied to be an unpleasant fate.

This is a considerably more triumphal conclusion than not only the original novel, but indeed essentially every novel le Carré ever published, constituting a radical break with what audiences familiar with his typically pessimistic work might have expected. Perhaps of significance is the possibility, raised in surrounding press material, of a sequel, now more than ever considered an ideal goal in 'quality' drama (Brown). The production of such a sequel would arguably be the most radical departure yet. Whilst the obvious precedent, the BBC's adaptation of *Smiley's People* as a sequel to *Tinker Tailor*, was enabled by the close narrative links between the two novels, none of the characters or situations in *The Night Manager* ever recurred in a later le Carré novel. Any such extension would therefore be into new terrain beyond the original material, taking an unprecedented liberty with le Carré's writing that indicates perhaps most clearly a decline in the reverential attitude of earlier BBC adaptations. More immediately, the effect is to mark Pine as decisively different from Pym despite their similarities. Triumphant over adversity whilst making essentially no compromise nor suffering any internal crisis, Pine is ultimately, unlike Pym, presented as having a firm moral centre beneath his chameleonic nature, able to exercise decisive ethical judgements of his own and fully reject the tainted inheritance offered by Roper.

In the context of the 'quality' debates at end of the 1980s, Brunsdon described four 'quality components' as being central to the 'Brideshead in the Crown' school of British prestige drama. Three of these remain strongly present in *The Night Manager*; the legitimising effect of a literary source, 'the best of British acting', and high production values (85-86). Missing, however, as part of the original novel's sharp divorce from Cold War history and the adaptation's glamorous approach, is the overt heritage component, the serial instead focusing on a very modern conception of a corrupt super-rich elite. Higson has acknowledged that the use of heritage in television criticism beyond the 1980s has been more uncertain (2001), yet considering the pedigree of the leading actors and the Cornwell brothers it is arguable that such heritage is indeed present but folded into the same category as the 'the best of British acting', Hiddleston, Laurie *et al* serving as the 'mere things' of an affluent world in human form. Samuel has argued that one problem with aligning the aristocratic-reactionary conception of heritage with the politics of the New Right in the 1980s lies in its contrast with Thatcher's active de-gentrification of the ruling Conservative Party (246). By the time of *The Night Manager*, however, there had been a resurgence of Old Etonians and

other former public schoolboys in the cabinet of David Cameron's Conservative government, a phenomenon often paralleled with the rarefaction of the acting profession. Most fundamentally, the transformation made to the ending enables the serial to go much further than the novel in redeeming the traditional Buchanesque gentleman hero, who re-emerges triumphant in the era of 'quality' television with the moral anxieties of the Cold War period entirely swept away. Even as he might show the power to reject a tainted inheritance on screen, in terms of production a privileged inheritance is stronger than ever.

Conclusion

Through a framework which positions *A Perfect Spy* as a reverential adaptation and *The Night Manager* as a more 'radical' dramatisation, this article has illustrated how approaches towards adapting John le Carré for television have changed over time, particularly in response to the 'quality' television movements of two different eras. As with its forebears, *Tinker Tailor* and *Smiley's People*, *A Perfect Spy* was fundamentally an in-house BBC production created within the public service tradition of prestige literary adaptations, and this model proved on many levels effective in dramatising the book's exploration of the crisis of the Buchanesque spy and le Carré's complex pattern of inheritances. Yet the serial was produced at a time when market forces were proving an increasingly potent force on British television drama production and when heritage drama was proving successful on the international market. As such, *A Perfect Spy* seems far more subsumed by the characteristics of heritage drama than *Tinker Tailor* had been previously. Even as it rigorously retains all the key narrative events of the novel and thereby ensures a high fidelity to the account of Pym's life, it adopts a formally conservative approach and discards the complex, non-chronological approach from which the book had derived much of its power. Instead this reverential approach seems guided by the priorities of the heritage cycle, specifically a focus on nostalgia through investment in the material objects of a romanticised past and the reduction of writing to a visual sign of 'literariness', diminishing the psychological exploration that was the central focus of the novel.

The 'radical' approach of *The Night Manager*, by contrast, manifested in a rejection of the overt heritage style of earlier le Carré adaptations with a focus on immediate topical geopolitical concerns and the glamorous world of the super-rich, as well as a greater willingness to alter the contents of the story instead of merely the form of storytelling. Whilst the original novel already worked to revive the traditional Buchanesque hero, here the decision to create a more optimistic (and potentially extendable ending) fully redeems this figure and banishes the sense of crisis that had surrounded him in works including *A Perfect Spy*. Despite trading on le Carré's considerable international profile, *The Night Manager* ultimately eliminates the bleakness and pessimism strongly associated with his name in the public imagination. This was an outcome of how project was largely originated and developed in a globalised independent production sector with the BBC in a comparatively hands-off role as just one financier and distribution partner, constituting an acute instance of what Jeanette Steemers describes as the 'tensions between the national orientations of commissioning U.K. broadcasters, who need to engage national audiences (dictated by regulatory frameworks and in the case of the BBC, by public funding) and the global

aspirations of independent producers and distributors... who are increasingly less aligned to the United Kingdom' (747). The 'radical' mode of adaptation seems symptomatic of a BBC increasingly less able to prioritise its national audience and public service obligations over the demands of international producers, distributors and audiences, for whom the jet-setting milieu and glamorous locations are perhaps of greater value than the moral ambiguity previously associated with le Carré's novels and their prior television adaptations.

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