OPENING CHOICES

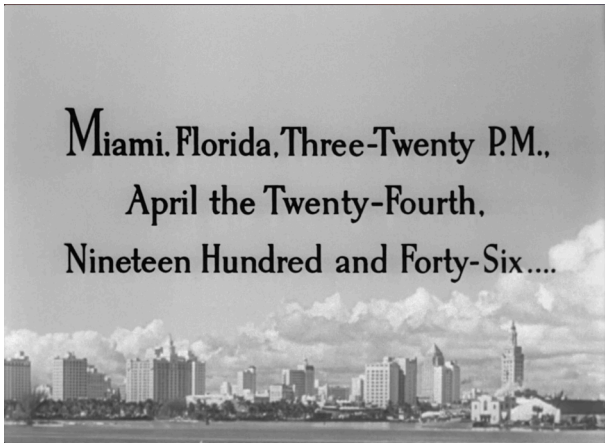
Tinker Tailor Solider Spy: Significantly ordinary

ABOVE *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (BBC, 1979): Opening shot of Cambridge Circus, London

Fade in on a towering, high-angle shot of London's Cambridge Circus at midday. As the camera stares down upon the streets below, we may note a number of pedestrians moving about – people walking along the pavement, cars and busses passing through the streets and around the junction's central concrete island. The sky overhead is grey and low, the trees bare, and the men and women all appear cloaked in heavy coats. It is winter, or perhaps late autumn. After lingering upon this scene for five seconds, a cut carries us inside a cramped, nondescript office, through the door of which a man enters, wearing a gaudy pin-striped suit that seems out of keeping with his drab surroundings.

So begins the 1979 BBC miniseries adaptation of John le Carré's 1974 novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, directed by John Irvin. In this essay, we will not be concerned with the man in the bespoke suit (a high-ranking Secret Intelligence Service official named Toby Esterhase, played by Bernard Hepton), nor with his three MI6 colleagues who soon follow him into the room, nor with the protagonist George Smiley's (Alec Guinness) quest to uncover which of those four men is a mole sent by the Soviet Union to sabotage Britain's intelligence gathering apparatus. We will not, that is, be concerned with any of the narrative intricacies or political intrigues of le Carré's spy story. My focus, will be on the opening shot, those first five seconds, that image of Cambridge Circus presented to us before the players take the stage and the wheels of plot begin to turn in earnest.

What are we to make of this shot? We might begin to answer that question by analyzing its basic formal function. It is, first and foremost, an establishing shot, meant to orient the spectator with regard to the film's fictional world and to indicate the story's location in time and space. Such opening shots, of course, have long been commonplace in narrative cinema. Classical Hollywood, for instance, abounded with opening shots of cityscapes and skylines. Films set in New York with



the Empire State Building or Rockefeller Center (*Nothing Sacred* [William Wellman, 1937]), those in San Francisco with the Golden Gate Bridge (*The Maltese Falcon* [John Huston, 1941]). More often than not, a printed title would accompany these images as a kind of confirmation. Films set in cities with less identifiable landmarks, such as *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946), would rely almost entirely on these textual accompaniments to convey the intended information.

Writing about such shots, Robert B. Ray argues that they may be taken as exemplary of commercial filmmaking's tendency to rely, in Roland Barthes's words, on 'a certain redundancy, a kind of semantic prattle.' 'Studio Hollywood,' Ray writes, 'will always assume the viewer's ignorance of even unmistakable landmarks. The Eiffel Tower must come equipped with an explicit marker, "PARIS"' (2008: 189). David Bordwell observes something similar about Hollywood's typical approach to openings in The Classical Hollywood Cinema. These moments, Bordwell suggests, often mark the point at which a film's narration is at its most overtly declarative and self-conscious (1985: 26). The key information is presented directly rather than through expository dialogue or some other more oblique device. To put it more succinctly, these moments tell rather than show.

Made for British television nearly twenty years after the final collapse of the Hollywood studio system, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* grows out of a very different aesthetic tradition than the Hollywood films mentioned above, but a comparison between its opening and theirs might still prove productive for teaching us about how the shot works, and about opening shots more generally. The shot of Cambridge Circus is neither boldly assertive in its iconography (as a shot of Big Ben would be), nor accompanied by a printed title to confirm the identity of the city we're looking at. To be sure, the series' original audience, watching on the BBC in 1979, might recognise the setting as Cambridge Circus (though the shot significantly omits the Palace Theatre, the intersection's most famous landmark). For non-British viewers (such as the author) encountering the series in syndication or on home video, however, that moment of instant recognition is much less likely to dawn, and in the absence of a captioning title a certain fog of indeterminacy will hang over the image. Even younger British audiences might have difficulty immediately recognising the exact location, as in the years since the series' initial airing the Circus's roundabout has been replaced with a crossroads. We might surmise from prior knowledge of le Carré's novel or of the series' basic premise (or by the presence of a red, double-decker Routemaster bus) that we are looking at a shot of London, but the image itself does not overtly assert this fact. Such inferences, that is, would be purely extra-textual.

TOP *Nothing Sacred* (William Wellman, 1937): Opening shot of New York's Rockefeller Plaza accompanied by written narration

MIDDLE *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941): The Golden Gate Bridge and identifying text

BOTTOM *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946): Miami's skyline with identifying text

What might we make of this decision? At one level, we might simply see it as an instance of what Mark Fisher has identified as the series' propensity to throw 'us directly into [its] world' with little explanation. 'Guinness's Smiley,' he writes, 'incarnated a model of BBC paternalism: he guided us through his world, but he had very high expectations of us' (2011: 41). The opening shot might thus be seen as an initial example of this explanatory reticence. Such reticence itself, furthermore, might be thought of as demonstrating a commitment to an aesthetic and narrative program that embraces what Ernest Callenbach once praised, in a letter to Seymour Chatman, as the cinema's 'inherent capacity for discretion and indirection' (Chatman 1990: 44).

Indeed, the shot of Cambridge Circus seems as good an illustration as any of Chatman's own contention that filmed images 'show only features; it is up to the audience to interpret them.' As an example of this phenomenon, Chatman points to a published transcription of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) that describes its opening shot as depicting 'a 25 year old brunette [walking] through the courtyard in front of a stately villa.' Unlike this prose description, Chatman argues, the film 'cannot guarantee […] that everyone in the audience understands the character to be exactly 25 and the villa to be stately' (1990: 43). Similarly, the makers of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* cannot guarantee that the

audience will immediately recognise Cambridge Circus. Classical Hollywood's tendency to affix printed titles to even the most iconographically 'obvious' establishing shots might be understood an anxious attempt to overcome precisely this inherent ambiguity.

But even printed titles and famous landmarks cannot fully guarantee that 'everyone in the audience' will grasp the information being conveyed. For a viewer who had never heard of San Francisco, *The Maltese Falcon*'s opening would seem as opaque as our shot of Cambridge Circus. In fact, in some senses, it might register as more opaque. Because its purpose is purely informational, and because the information it seeks to convey is so simple and direct ('this film is set in San Francisco, CA'), even a small failure of comprehension will render the shot uncommunicative. On the other hand, because it is less overtly informational and more open in design, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s opening shot can still function even for an audience wholly unfamiliar with the locale it depicts. The question, then, is what does it function as? What information does it offer?

We might begin to answer this by thinking about the image, and its classical Hollywood cousins, by following Ray's invocation of Barthes and employing the tripartite semiotic schema proposed in his canonical essay 'The Rhetoric of the Image'. Any given photograph, Barthes posits, contains three distinct levels of meaning, 'a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message' (1977: 36). The first of these is more or less self-explanatory, comprising any and all printed or spoken language that accompanies a given image – captions on newspaper photographs or advertisements, dialogue or voiceover in films or TV programs, and so on. Its function, more often than not, is to 'anchor' our reading of the image, clarifying the image's contents and directing our interpretation. The second two, Barthes notes, are slightly more difficult to define and disentangle, as they 'share the same (iconic) substance' (1977: 36). Roughly, though, the 'coded' iconic message works through visual elements that derive from, and refer to, 'a general cultural knowledge' (35) and its meanings are largely '"symbolic" [...] or connoted' (46). A photograph of the Eiffel Tower, for instance, may be used to convey notions of class and sophistication stereotypically associated with a particular kind of 'Parisian' culture.

In contrast with the connotative and coded second message, the third is both more obvious and elusive. This 'denoted message' is what remains, or what would remain, if 'the signs of connotation [were] mentally deleted' (42). That is, the third message is simply the 'real objects' present before the camera. Unlike the first two messages, Barthes suggests, 'reading' this message requires no linguistic or cultural foreknowledge, but only basic perceptual faculties. Beyond connoting class and sophistication, a photograph of the Eiffel Tower also presents a large metallic structure towering over a cityscape whose existence, as an object, precedes and exceeds the cultural connotations we might attach to it.

With this is mind, we can begin to make a finer distinction between the typical Classic Hollywood establishing shot and the one we encounter at the start of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. The examples from Hollywood operate almost exclusively at the linguistic and iconic levels, offering heavily coded images that both clearly indicate a locale and draw upon stores of cultural connotations to prepare us for the film that follows. As Ray puts it, Hollywood filmmaking 'practices a certain laconic economy, dependent on the audience's knowledge of stereotypes' (2008: 189). To continue with our previous example, we might reasonably expect a Hollywood film that opens with a shot of the Eiffel Tower to be a light, 'sophisticated' comedy. Similarly, the opening of a film like *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944) immediately suggests exotic, high seas adventurism, while *It's a Wonderful Life*'s (Frank Capra, 1946) conjures the image of 'small town America' and its attendant virtues.

In contrast, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s first shot initially appears to be more purely denotative, presenting us a scene without apparent significance, an image without clear reference to any well-defined cultural code – a simple slice of city life caught unawares, an unstaged depiction of 'aleatory' action. And yet, as Barthes is quick to point out, no photograph can be wholly without connotation: 'Even if a totally "naive" image were to be achieved, it would immediately join the sign of naivety and be completed by a third – symbolic – message […]. It is an absence of meaning full of all

TOP *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944): An opening image evoking high seas adventure and foreign intrigue

BOTTOM *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946): An opening image evoking small town America

the meanings' (1977: 42). Something of this nature is at work in the shot of Cambridge Circus. The signifiers here, though not so obviously coded as the Eiffel Tower or the Golden Gate Bridge, still signify. The sights and muffled, distantly recorded sounds of the city, of a commercial district in daylight, evoke the hustle and bustle of ordinary life, calling to mind the shared cultural experiences of workaday drudgery. The circular motion of vehicles moving around the intersection's central island conveys this more forcefully, standing as a kind of symbolic representation of, or objective correlative for, the repetitive, diurnal cycle of the typical weekday. Indeed, years later, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant would include in the opening credits of *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003) a shot that (unconsciously?) echoes *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s opening image. Moreover, the shot itself seems to recall, if unintentionally, the opening sequence of the long-running ITV soap opera *Coronation Street*, whose static shots of a practically anonymous Northern English town quickly establishes the series' working class milieu.

BELOW *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003): An image from the opening credits reminiscent of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s opening

Both *Coronation Street* and *The Office* were series manifestly about the ordinary, with the latter, in particular, concerning itself with depicting the crushing dullness of everyday life in a corporate, bureaucratic society. In its own way, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* shares this concern. In his novels, le Carré has always taken pains to stress the wretched and unglamorous aspects of spycraft and espionage. His first novels, appearing in the early 1960s, are easily read as implicit rebukes to the adolescent fantasies of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and their popular film adaptations. If those films made the spy's life out to be a never-ending parade of car chases, gunfights, and amorous conquests set in exotic locations all over the globe, le Carré responded by depicting the business of intelligence gathering as, well, a business. Sure, spies may travel to Budapest or Lisbon (as characters in Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy do), but most of the important action is carried out by stern looking men in cramped London offices. As the protagonist of le Carré's breakout novel, 1963's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, puts it, '[Spies are] just a bunch of squalid, seedy bastards like me: little men, drunkards, queers, hen-pecked husbands, civil servants playing cowboys and Indians.'

Despite le Carré's authorial insistence, however, we as readers might still be tempted to 'dress up' the mental images we generate while reading his books. Fired by their exposure to the Bond films and other popular spy fictions, our imaginations might unconsciously impute some romance and adventure into the novels' cold, starkly bureaucratic world, or make their characters slightly more attractive and glamorous than le Carré's prose descriptions might suggest them to be. Words on a page are, after all, merely words on a page, and even the most precise collection of adjectives remains open to a degree of imaginative interpretation.

The results of succumbing to such temptations are fruitfully demonstrated in the 2011 feature film adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* directed by Tomas Alfredson. Though Alfredson and his collaborators admirably condense le Carré's labyrinthine plot into a two-hour runtime, they fatally miss the mark when it comes to capturing the book's mood and spirit. Fisher, in his discussion of the film, evocatively highlights several of its failings on this front in the areas of casting and mise-en-scène, noting that 'too many' of the

film's 'preposterously fresh faced' actors 'too often [...] seem like twenty-first century moisturized metrosexuals in 1970s drag – and bad drag at that […]. The skin, the hair, are too good. The faces are without the sallow, harried look [...] their voices unable to convey any sense of the bitter, brutalizing effects of the spy's life' (2011: 41). Fisher also notes a shift from the series' 'unprepossessing, functional, dreary' interiors to the more lavishly appointed sets of the film, whose version of the MI6 office resembles, to his eyes, 'something from a nightclub' (2011: 42).

In keeping with our present focus, we might also profitably compare the film's opening to that of the series. After a brief prologue depicting a meeting between Control (John Hurt), the former head of MI6, and Jim Prideaux (Mark Strong), one of his agents, in which the basic elements of the mole plotline are established, the film immediately transports us to Budapest, where Prideaux has been sent to gather information on the mole. The sequence is larded with sweeping vistas and swooping tracking shots and accompanied by a dramatic, orchestral score. This ostentatious camera style, which Alfredson continues to employ through the remainder of the film, is in stark contrast to the spartan restraint of the BBC series, but well in accord with the cinematographic norms of the contemporary spy thriller. We can thus see here where the film version goes awry. It sees le Carré's novel as merely another spy story, and consequently adorns it with all of that genre's standard signifiers and stylistic effects. One of the great virtues of Irvin's version is that it recognises that le Carré was doing something other than just writing spy stories, and in adapting the novel for the (small) screen it effectively concretises his vision of espionage as primarily a dreary and quotidian affair. Unlike with the novel, where our imaginations remain free to run (somewhat) wild, the BBC series insists on these elements.

Chatman, in a different exploration of the difference between narrational processes in cinema and literature, argues that the key distinction between the 'ways that visual details are presented in novels and films' is their relative level of assertiveness. As he puts it,

> an 'assertion' is a statement, usually an independent sentence or clause, that something is in fact the case, that it is a certain sort of thing, that it does in fact have certain properties or enter into certain relations, namely, those listed. Opposed to asserting there is mere naming. (1980: 128)

He illustrates this by comparing two statements: 'The cart was tiny; it came onto the bridge' and 'The green cart came onto the bridge.' The first of these, he argues, 'asserts that certain property of the cart being small in size and that certain relation of arriving on the bridge' while the second 'assert[s] nothing more than [the cart's] arrival at the bridge; the greenness of the cart is not asserted but slipped in without syntactic fuss. It is only named.' Film, he goes on to suggest, is mostly 'of the latter textual order: it requires special effort for films to assert a property or relation. The dominant mode is presentation, not assertive' (1980: 128). Earlier, we looked at *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s opening shot as an example of exactly this phenomenon, of film's apparent capacity to present without asserting, to depict without editorialising.

Looked at in comparison with the 2011 film version, and with mainstream spy films more generally, however, the shot suddenly seems to take on a slightly different character, and its very reticence and discretion come to appear as its most assertive aspects. What they assert, though, has nothing to

ABOVE *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (Tomas Alfredson, 2011): A sweeping vista of Budapest

do with the internal properties and relations of the scene depicted, but rather with the series' own aesthetic strategies and their relation to the other members of its genre. If we take the series as a whole to be at least in part a rebuke to Bond films and other mainstream spy fictions, then we might see its pedestrian and ordinary opening shot as offering something like a statement of purpose. What is more, our ability to 'read' this aspect of the shot depends just as much on a pre-established knowledge of cultural codes as does our ability to 'know' what images of the Eiffel Tower or Golden Gate Bridge signify. We must have some familiarity with the conventions of the spy genre in order to recognise *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s divergence from them. Here, though, the codes communicate not by being present in the image, but by being absent from it. Their silence speaks volumes.

At the same time, as VF Perkins and Gilberto Perez have pointed out, no shot can ever be a 'simple' depiction completely devoid of commentary or expressivity. The nature of the medium itself requires that the camera be placed in a particular position so as to record a particular aspect of the world from a particular angle and distance. Such placement involves a deliberate choice of perspective, and no perspective can ever be completely neutral or free of implication. In attending to these matter, we might note Irvin's choice to film *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s opening shot of Cambridge Circus from an abnormally distant and severe high-angle perspective. In the context of a story about spying and espionage, and about ordinary-looking men who engage in such activities, and who might be hiding dark and terrible secrets, such a perspective cannot help but take on a lightly sinister aspect, carrying with it a whispered suggestion of mass surveillance networks operating just out of view. Such an association, of course, may strike a contemporary audience more forcefully than it might have the series' original audience in 1979, over a decade before CCTV and other surveillance systems became ubiquitous in London and other major global cities. But such an association is still there in the shot's framing, waiting to be read – another reminder of both the imbrication of everyday life and geopolitical power that is one of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*'s chief concerns, and of the dense significance present in this apparently ordinary opening image.

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