

Spy Films and Intellectual Alienation

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The article analyzes spy films as examples of alienation within modern office life. It shows how intellectual socialization within this type of life can lead to a corruption of a person's moral capabilities. The article studies this corruption process with a focus on how the moral person, in this case the fictional spy character, uses her intellect in relation to other mental faculties and in relation to the person's own biographical experience of time. With reference to Plato and Hannah Arendt, the article shows that the professional use of intellect has an *active* and a *passive* quality. It is passive in so far as the person acquires it gradually, through training. It is active on the other hand, since the person willingly submits to this training. The moral stakes of these spy narratives thus concerns the choice to become a certain kind of person by subjecting oneself to a certain type of intellectual training. Memory forms an entry into this question of choice in all the examined films, hence memory is also at the centre of my analysis. This psychological mode of interpretation is inspired by Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative.

Keywords: Memory, Intellect, Intelligence, Motivation, Plato, Hermeneutics, Ricoeur, Arendt

Introduction

The paper studies the ethics of *intellectual socialization* in a number of spy films. Through a study of a process of socialization, the article arrives at an ethical problem of *alienation*, which is shown to occur in the lives of the main characters in these stories, the spies. The paper seeks to redefine the classical Frankfurt school problem of alienation within a Platonic and Aristotelian hermeneutic frame of interpretation. The notion of intellectual socialization is articulated through a discussion of Plato and Hannah Arendt, who was herself rooted in a Platonic tradition¹. Against this background, spy films appear here as contemporary voices in a very long conversation concerning the nature of intellect, the agency of memory, and the *responsibility* that one carries for *the self that one has become*, through intellectual habit.

The spy is someone who lives at the margins of the everyday, part of, yet not part of, the social normality of ordinary citizens. She is further someone who possesses an unusual set of intellectual skills. It is not a coincidence that the activity of spying is referred to in English as "intelligence". These intellectual skills are exercised within a specific network of power. The spy is employed by a state agency. He is not free to exercise his intellectual skills at will, nor does he sell his intellectual labour force for the purpose of producing things. The spy's intellectual output is secret, even in relation to the institutional apparatus of the state. Finally, the spy enjoys certain freedoms in comparison with other citizens, since not all the laws, which others have to obey, apply to him. The question that I seek to open, against this background of the spy's specialized use of intellect,

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¹ The claim that Arendt is rooted in a Platonic tradition does not mean that she is a Platonist but that her work engages with Plato. Her political philosophy is written against Plato's *Republic*, her early and late work is devoted to Augustine, who was a Platonic philosopher.

is the following: What is the moral *impact* of intellectual activity upon the person who is a spy, in other words, what is the ethical implication for the spy of her own use of intellect?

This question has wider sociological implications as the spy film genre enlarges aspects of office work and, hence of intellectual socialization, which are characteristic of modern, state and private, institutions generally. Spy films thus appear as sociological scenarios describing intellectual modernity more broadly. The extravagant secrecies and limitless moral potentials of the spy film plots should thus never obscure the fact that the intellectual socialization, which these films describe, is a feature also of current life styles within current institutional normality.

The article explores three sets of spy films: the two Le Carré TV adaptations with Alec Guinness, *Tinker Taylor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People*; the *Bourne* trilogy; and the TV series *Homeland*. Of that series I will analyze the first four seasons. They form a narrative arc and unit and I will treat them as such. The same goes for the first three films about Jason Bourne².

The impact of intelligence work upon the intelligent main character is framed in these films by two ethical questions: What is the social place of the spy, with regards to the fabric of everyday life? What remains for the spy of the moral system that is operative within the society that he is part of—notions of responsibility, values, inhibitions? In sociological terms, the spy occupies a liminal social space and has an ambivalent relation to morality, as she defends a society whose moral norms she also transgresses. Nevertheless, each of these films gives a subtly different answer to these questions. The three sets of films present characters who occupy distinct social positions, and who entertain quite different conceptions of moral limits. Emerging from this presentation of social and moral borders, each of the films develops a distinct perspective upon the *ethical implications of intellect*.

The films also present distinct aesthetic perspectives on the spy protagonist's relation to his or her environment. In the Le Carré films one senses an echo of Graham Greene: The narrative focus is psychological and moral, centered on the predicament and fate of one character—and this focus raises few political, social, or philosophical questions. *Homeland*, on the other hand, is filmed in a style which hovers between documentary and TV drama: Its focus is overwhelmingly social and institutional. In *Tinker Taylor* and *Smiley's People*, a satirical or simply comic effect is derived from the eccentricity of nearly all the minor characters. This eccentricity makes the social institution of the intelligence service itself appear theatrical, as a stage where social misfits can express themselves. *Homeland* does exactly the opposite. It portrays characters who display excessive and often transgressive behaviour, while being apparently very ordinary in most circumstances. The *Bourne* films belong to the genre of block buster action films—and they have influenced that genre and become canonical within it. This status of perfection is due to the films' narrative elegance and allegorical potential. They are *action* films in the sense of physical action, which means violence, chase, escape. They are also *films of action*, in the narrative sense of being, visually and rhythmically, organized around physical movement. Hence they display aesthetically the rhythm of body movement. This kinetic style removes almost all the viewer's attention from social and psychological characterization. It also produces an abstract narrative, which lends itself to allegorical reading. Especially the second and third film, *The Bourne Supremacy* and *The Bourne*

² *Homeland*, seasons I-IV 2011-2014, TV series for Showtime, creators, Howard Gordan, Alex Gansa; *Tinker Taylor Soldier Spy*, TV series for BBC, 1979, Director John Irwin; *Smiley's People*, TV series for BBC, 1982, Director Simon Langdon, *The Bourne Identity*, 2002, Director Doug Liman; *The Bourne Supremacy*, 2004, Director Paul Greengrass; *The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007, Director Paul Greengrass.

Ultimatum appear like Foucauldian meditations on surveillance.

Hermeneutics of Intellect

A notion of *ethical stakes* is at the centre of my interpretation of these films. These stakes do not immediately emerge from any one of these aesthetic perspectives or modes of representation: The ethical stakes are not conventionally *moral* in the sense of character psychology. They are also not straightforwardly social or ideological. The ethical stakes emerge thus, not directly from the film's mode of representation, but *hermeneutically*, within the context of a reflective interpretation upon what the story of the protagonist in each case entails, in terms of selfhood and loss of responsibility. The difference in genre and style between these films is an advantage for the hermeneutic exploration of these questions as it enlarges the scope of ethical reflection.

This article aims to introduce into film studies a neo-Aristotelian method of ethical and hermeneutical criticism and to claim for this style of criticism themes of alienation, which were previously the province of Frankfurt school criticism. This neo-Aristotelian approach has been practiced in the philosophy of literature by Paul Ricoeur in his trilogy *Time and Narrative*. One aspect of this method is especially of relevance for film criticism as it allows us to reformulate the concept of realism in film. Since Bazin and Kracauer, critics have tied questions of realist representation in film to aesthetic problems, which have their origin either in photography or in visual dramatic composition. Kracauer in *Theory of Film* sees film to be a direct continuation of photography and as harbouring some of the same aesthetic potentials of capturing contingency. In Bazin's theoretical reflections on framing and deep focus, the realist pretention of a film is taken to be embedded within the visual composition of individual scenes. Ricoeur invites us to think of realism more conceptually and in a less aesthetic sense. He follows Aristotle very strictly in thinking that plot is more important than spectacle. The action captured by a story is a real action not in the sense of a *token*, but in the sense of a species, a natural kind. Action in general, or as a natural kind, has a temporal and intentional structure, which we as readers are *always already* acquainted with and which is universal. Narrative interprets and particularizes this action species. Hence, narrative is made realistic not by the concomitant circumstances of action, but by the fact that what is represented within the narrative has the *general form* of action. When Aristotle opens the *Poetics* by saying that "*mythos*" (plot, fable) renders or imitates "*praxis*" (action), he lets us understand that this is possible, because plot, far from being an invention drawn solely from the imagination, can endeavour to *resemble* the actual structure of action. Ricoeur develops this realist thought by coining the useful term "*mise en intrigue*", the turning into plot of story material. *Mise en intrigue* is the articulation, through narrative, of specific but universal aspects of action. In English, this term becomes "emplotment", but I will stay with the French wording a little longer as it possesses a rich field of resonance: We may say that *mise en intrigue* echoes *mise en scene*. This parallel on the level of sound suggests that we should compare Ricoeur to Bazin. According to Bazin, film, considered both as an artefact and as a creative process, is defined by *mise en scene*. Film is the translation of story material into a narrative image. Now *mise en intrigue* suggests a different emphasis, on *fable* rather than *sujet*; the creative process is grounded in the interpretation of the story material of which the fable (*mythos*) is the result. In the spy narratives that I study here, fable construction is centered around the agency of *intellect* within *intelligence* work. This emplotment of intellect is in all these films filtered through a problem of memory. Ricoeur (2000) has also analyzed the phenomenology of memory. As a mental activity, memory exhibits its own specific structure and harbours its own specific ethical implications, as a *resistance* to

collective forgetting. In this article, I am interested in the emplotment of memory as a mode of resistance to intellectual alienation. This problem has its origins in the same intellectual tradition of philosophical psychology that Ricoeur writes himself into with his work on memory and the responsibility that the subject has for remembering, or forgetting. This is as an Aristotelian and Platonic tradition, which studies mental activities as agencies for which the person who exercises that agency is indeed always responsible. This Aristotelian and Platonic perspective is different from thinking of mental activities with reference to a medical or cognitive concept of the mind. First, it does not involve a general theory of normality and dysfunction. Second, it involves a number of ethical questions. This is because in this classical tradition, the question of how we *use* our mental faculties is inseparable from questions of how this use may contribute to an ethically good life, or inversely, lead us away from our best ethical possibilities. Another philosopher of the 20th century who like Ricoeur revives this philosophical ethical psychology is Hannah Arendt. In this article, I shall refer in particular to her interpretation of Eichmann—and to her reading of Augustine. I shall relate this to a discussion in Plato concerning choices determining the formation of a future self.

Arendt presents, as a kind of programme, the idea that our use of intellect within the moral sphere should be *problematized* through a reflection upon memory. This is exactly what I aim to do here, on the small scale of a case study of spy films. My method in reflecting on these films is hermeneutic in that I see these films as projecting, onto a virtual narrative surface, possible scenarios of intellectual agency related to memory in different ways. These films are not stories, which we unpack in order to discover a theme or a complexity of character. Rather, the characters, the story, and the visual composition of these films are fully at the service of virtual scenarios of intellect and memory. This projection is not allegorical, since there is no hidden, more abstract idea of intellect or of memory, which would be waiting to be disclosed. The scenario is already on the surface of the film story an explicit *enactment* of intellect in time. The hermeneutic effort consists in lifting from a specific narrative the agencies of the mind, which are operating within it.

We may find an underlying formal affinity between the Aristotelian (and Platonic) ethical criticism that I present here and the spy genre, both in film and in literature. This is a genre, in which the personal stakes of the action for the characters are always relative to a political situation. Hence, the arena of intelligibility of these stories can never be completely psychological or character focused. The Aristotelian psychology of intellect amounts to exactly this: It is the study of mental activities, which do not derive their entire meaning and purpose from the person who has them. They are seen as activities of relating to the world. They are intelligible as the way in which a typical person relates to a known situation or problem³. In other words, it is the psychologically *schematic* tendency of the spy genre, which makes it philosophically interesting—from an Aristotelian, and as we shall see, Platonic, point of view.

Arendt

The theme of intellectual socialization in spy films is similar to a topic that was addressed in the sixties, and in a different political context, by Arendt. In her interpretation of the figure of Adolph Eichmann, whom she observed during the Jerusalem trial, she noted in him a peculiar, faulty, relationship with language (Arendt, 1963). She interpreted this language “disorder” by pointing to a parallel between language and power. Both confront the subject as a social reality that it has to decipher correctly. In both cases, if the subject fails to

³ This is evident throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

understand this social reality, it also fails in a more fundamental way. The subject is then no longer fully autonomous, nor fully aware of the meaning of its actions, and not able to control its decisions. Eichmann, who failed to master language, also, much more disastrously failed to understand the logic of power to which he was contributing. His lack of lucid understanding made him a professional executive of extermination, Arendt argues, seemingly playing down the ethical stakes of his actions. According to her, Eichmann became the Eichmann of history, a subordinate of Heydrich and Himmler, and an organizer of the Holocaust, through a deficient exercise of his intellect. This thesis, that a particular, deficient use of intellect can have disastrous ethical implications, is what I wish to explore further in this paper. I will do so first by situating Arendt's thesis on Eichmann, which can initially appear provocative, in the philosophical context in which Arendt developed her conception of motivation. With her analysis of Eichmann, Arendt inscribes herself within a Platonic ethical tradition, as Plato claims that we become who we are through our habits of thought.

Much is in fact at stake for Socrates in Plato's early dialogues when a young man chooses a profession and a teacher. What is at stake is the way that the young man proposes to treat his soul. This concretely means how he will develop the balance between different components and activities within his soul (Gerson, 2006)⁴. Plato entertains different conceptions of how our mental activities are related, but the common theme of *The Republic* and the *Gorgias* is that intellect has a dominant position in relation to desire, without thereby directly suppressing desire. The relation is indirect. One way in which intellect may indirectly dominate our desires is that, over time, the use one makes of one's intellect will lend a direction to one's appetites. In the happiest scenario, one will be someone whose desires are so much oriented by the goods revealed by the intellect that one can no longer make sense of wanting something other than what intellectually seems desirable. This Platonic conception of motivation shaped by intellect survives throughout our tradition. It is reformulated by Spinoza with his concept of *conatus* (effort), encompassing intellect and desire. It is eliminated by Kant in his dualistic philosophy of reason, where our moral adherence to duty is not supported, in any way, by our cognitive powers. Then, in the 1920s the Platonic unity of motivation returns within the philosophy of Martin Heidegger who had an influence on the thought of Arendt—as we know. In his lectures, and in his work *Being and Time*, Heidegger sought to formulate a holistic picture of purposeful activity. In this picture, the distinction between intellect and desire is subordinate to a structure of purposefulness. Purpose is defined in terms of pragmatic everyday activity, on the one hand, and, on the other, by an existential self-awareness, which is framed by the appreciation of one's own mortality.

Our understanding of purposefulness in our lives comes to us via these two different routes: On the one I have practical concerns; on the other hand, an awareness of my mortality makes me reflect on my life as a whole. At the time when Heidegger developed his philosophy of purpose, Arendt, who was his student, wrote a dissertation on Saint Augustine's philosophy of love. In this work, she uses categories derived from Heidegger's lectures. She sums up Augustine's psychology of desire, or striving (*appetitus*), in the following, Heideggerian, terms:

We see that the good of the humans, which would bring them to beatitude, finds its source and definition within two distinct structures: the good is that which appetite strives for, i.e. a useful inner worldly something, which one hopes to possess; that which determines the good to be such, on the other hand, is derived from a fear of death [...] (Arendt, 2003, p. 32, my translation)

⁴ For Plato's ontology of soul see Lloyd P. Gerson: *Knowing Persons: A Study in Plato*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

For Augustine, as for Plato, desire is determined by a conception of what is desirable. Arendt brings this understanding of motivation into the context of Heidegger's existential holism. Thus, for Arendt it would be as a *whole existing person* that one picks out which "things" one wants to strive for—and it is as a *whole existing person* that one affects oneself through one's habits of intellect. These habits are formed within a specific environment. In the course of her work, Arendt in fact moves from a holistic psychology to a holistic historical understanding of how an individual's use of intellect is shaped within specific surroundings. This is particularly true of her study of the Romantic intellectual Rachel Varnhagen, whom she analyzes in terms of her, Varnhagen's, own motivations but also in terms of the shifting social conditions of Berlin in the early nineteenth century.

Arendt retains a holistic understanding of motivation throughout her works. In her most famous books, *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution*, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, she argues vigorously against what we may call "decontextualizing" concepts of motivation. These would be concepts derived from the social sciences, concepts such as "interest", "need", or "ideology" (Beiser, 2011)⁵. These are notions which can be ascribed, equally, to individuals and groups, outside of any specific set of determining circumstances. Returning to Eichmann, we can see the socialization of his motivation to have taken shape within a specific, and specifically corrupting, environment, in which he assiduously "trained" himself to understand his surroundings *only partially*, and to act on this partial understanding.

This gradual formation of motivation through training has a temporal dimension, which Arendt returned to in a later work. In a text on the notion of will, from her work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt develops an analysis of this temporal dimension of motivation based now on a concept of memory. In this text, which she wrote nearly 50 years after her dissertation, she returns to Augustine. Arguing against a purely intellectual understanding of motivation in medieval philosophy, she now argues that Augustine would have retained a corrective to this intellectual trend. He did this, not as one might think, by referring to emotion, but, she claims, by defining memory as a *faculty equal to the intellect*. It is worthwhile quoting this passage from *The Life of the Mind* at length:

If one comes to Thomas and Duns Scotus from Augustine, the most striking change is that neither is concerned with the problematic nature of the Will, seen as an isolated faculty; what is at stake for them is the relation between Will and Reason or Intellect [...] It may be of even greater significance, especially given Augustine's enormous influence on both thinkers, that, of Augustine's three mental faculties—Memory, Intellect and Will—one has been lost, namely Memory, the most specifically Roman one, binding men back to the past. (Arendt, 1978, p. 117)

Memory will play an important role also in my analysis of the uses of intellect in spy films as noted above.

One sees easily that the following three factors—the social dimension of intelligence work, the subject's construction of temporality, and the mental activities based on memory (such as *remorse*)—are closely intertwined. Rather than seeking at the outset to systematize this relationship, I will move back and forth between emotion, social setting, and temporality. This is how ethical temporality is constructed in typical spy films.

Emotion and Socialization

The spies in these films are sustained in their identity as persons by the office that they hold. It is their

⁵ I interpret Arendt as belonging within a historicist tradition.

profession, and the authority that it gives them, which defines their place in the social world. The main characters of these films are very different, but they are all in this way defined by their special status as spies. Their family identity, class identity, and relation to other people, all come to be inflected by their spy status. This identity is further existentially filled out, and given meaning, by them as individual subjects. This is so because they each show an unusual degree of commitment towards their task. They are existential spies not plodding bureaucrats. We might even say that they are idealists. Now, this idealism is paradoxical. The figure of the spy as these films depict her is such that it allows a certain kind of intelligent individual to develop an existential commitment towards a cause that has been presented to her from the outside, a cause defined by state authorities in terms of state security interests. This cause is quite different from one that it resembles closely, which is an *ideological* cause. The spy cause is all absorbing and the commitment to the cause is absolute in the way of some followers of an ideology. Yet, the spy cause is not defined by ideas in an ideological sense; the formal question of state security is neutral in terms of ideology. Any group within society, if it is seen as a threat, or an enemy of the state, can be defined as an object worth spying upon. The spy is in fact also often a kind of expert in ideology in virtue of the enemy that she studies; it is part of her task to understand the reasoning of the enemy in order to predict the enemy's next move. The spy can therefore appear as an intellectual but her own use of intellect, her own cleverness, is put to use in an entirely operative way in order to predict the next moves of the current enemy. It is quite logical therefore that, at the same time as being intellectuals of some sort, spies have the authority of military officers. Outside their state sponsored power, these spies are powerless and lose any sense of identity, both in social and in existential terms. In the *Bourne* trilogy, the main character's exit from the CIA was involuntary and unplanned and made him a *persona non grata*, a person whose existence on the whole planet from then on appears to be impossible, as he finds nowhere to hide from his previous employer. The main characters in the four first seasons of *Homeland*—Kerry, Saul, and Quinn (who enters in season 3)—at various points either try to quit, or are put under pressure to stop working as spies, but they all fail, as if addicted to their job, and to the sense of purpose that it gives them as individuals. Each of the Smiley films begins with the retirement of Smiley, the main character, only to continue with his temporary reinstatement into service. One of the main characters of *Homeland*, Saul, illustrates this professional identity in an exemplary way. His work dependency is such that he is *de facto* not properly himself outside the office, for only in the office is his special mix of judgement and ruthlessness an asset. At home he is merely a somewhat grumpy patriarch, struggling to keep his wife, Myra who rightly suspects him of keeping his best worries for his subordinate Kerry. She on the other hand exemplifies a more extreme work addiction as her psychological disorder, and talent for intelligence work, means that the office becomes her only home. Through the plot, Kerry is presented as a solitary figure unburdened by the duties of love, unattached to a space, which could be called hers. Hence all the flats that we see her living in look as if no-one are living there. Kerry is positioned, in the social world of the office, between Saul, the patriarch and Quinn, who is an assassin. Together the three of them form a sort of family within the intelligence agency. This *ersatz* family in the office makes their job world complete and creates a wall of emotional buffers to the outside world. This notion of emotional and social closure will turn out to be very significant for the ethical implications of these characters' use of intellect.

There is in this series a play on the notions of home and the familiar, the relation between everyday reality and the exceptional. The title *Homeland* is ironic in this respect, as it carries several layers of resonance. Homeland Security is supposed to protect US citizens against foreign aggressions, such as terrorist attacks.

Through the double agent Brody, who at one point is Kerry's lover, the enemy is also at the same time *brought home*. The term *Homeland* also denotes the land where people live everyday lives—and in this respect the series is a mixture of genres, two of them being studies of the everyday in its mundane details. Police procedural is a catalogue of office routines; TV melodrama, or soap opera, is the dissection of love and family emotions in a domestic place. Yet, this familiar, and familial, world of the office is slightly schizophrenic, as their work itself is based on deception, transgression, lies, and sudden acts of extreme violence.

Emotional Closure

The *closure* of the spy's social world forms a psychological humus in which her intellect develops and her emotions take shape. As intellectuals these fictional spies are both able to act in accordance with their intellect, and also *unable not* do so. They are rarely driven by desires or emotions, which would be irrelevant to their intellectual objectives and rarely leave space in their existence for activities or relations, which would have their *raison d'être* in emotion. This does not mean, however, that these characters are unemotional, but rather that their intellectual life forms a context for their emotional life and that often these characters alternate, uncontrollably, between affect and intellect.

Returning to the character Kerry in *Homeland*, we see her oscillating between lucidity and paranoia. She can never be identified with a stable position in the divide between professionals and mad men. She appears out of control as well as professional, unpredictable but at the same time determined, in her objectives, by her professional environment (somewhat like the figure of Eichmann in Arendt's analysis). During the fourth season, Kerry evolves from being a quite idealistic person, pursuing her own idiosyncratic interpretation of events, often against the odds of a rigid bureaucracy, to being a figure of considerable authority—but a person who is also a morally ambiguous character. What were risky acts as she was younger become callous acts when she can decide for others. Thus in the transition from a subordinate to a superior position, a change takes place in the relationship between her own actions and others, and this change is not a change merely in terms of power. It is an ethical change. Throughout the four first seasons, Kerry displays, as I suggested above, a psychological symbiosis with her professional context, a complete overlap between her own desires and her professional objectives. This leads her to literally sleep with the enemy, as she falls in love with a double agent. When she was operating as a lone wolf without responsibility for others, her actions were tolerated and at times reigned in, and this symbiosis was personal. When she acquires the authority to organize larger scenarios, the symbiosis takes on a very different, less personal quality, which seems at times *psychotic*: It now appears as if she cannot fully perceive the people working for her as having a separate existence, as being real and not just figments of her own tactical imagination.

In the two Smiley series, themes of manipulation and betrayal are also central to the plot, but these themes are presented within a context of apparent psychological normality. Here the ethical stakes of manipulation concern a consistent pattern of *asymmetry of emotion* expressed in Smiley's treatment of others and of their emotional well being. A good example of this arises in his encounter with a certain Ricky Tar. Tar is a minor character in the plot, yet the moral stake of Smiley's use of this character is central to the overall ethical theme in the film. Ricky Tar, a junior intelligence officer, is sent on a mission to Lisbon. There he seduces a Russian woman, Iryna, who is the wife of a Russian spy. Iryna reveals to Tar that there is a Russian plant on the upper floors of British intelligence. As Tar relates this information to his superiors, Iryna disappears. Tar, who sees in this a confirmation of her suspicion, goes underground and then reappears in order to confess his story to

Smiley. He listens to this story and then has Tar locked up and put under surveillance in a house in the country, far from anyone who could harm him—or discover his secrets. During this course of events, Iryna is the centre of Tar's mental life. Later, we discover that she has been executed. Smiley is then adamant that Tar should not learn about Iryna's death, explaining that he might then act erratically. This remark reveals the asymmetry of emotion, which governs Smiley's relationships with others throughout. Smiley appears cool headed precisely in order to protect and to *use the emotions of others*. Hence, we see Smiley always measuring very carefully what sort of emotion; if any, he will reveal to others. He displays a large repertoire of emotional attitudes that he can play like a musical instrument, without revealing much of his actual feelings. He does this in his effort to coax others, gain their trust, and find the weakness in their character that will allow him a way in. In *Tinker Taylor*, we see him talking to a former subordinate, a jovial and insecure man who was involved in an important operation linked to the "mole", the Russian plant. Smiley appears during their meeting as a fatherly figure who is sympathetic to the other man's troubles, and who cannot, from the height of secrecy where he himself has to live, share any of his own thoughts. This kindly superiority appears to be just the right tone for the other man to feel confident. Now, this emotional self-control and this asymmetry of emotion, not only mean that Smiley manipulates others and their emotions, but also mean that he manipulates *himself* and his own emotions, excluding himself, from himself, so to speak. This phrase echoes a rueful quip that Smiley makes at the beginning of *Tinker Taylor*, when he thinks of himself as a retired eccentric: "we old people like to keep ourselves, to ourselves". As the film goes on to show, this is exactly what Smiley is unable to do.

Intellect

The *Bourne* trilogy opens with the existential situation of a man who is found, by a fishing boat, floating in the ocean. He has lost his memory and the only sign of his identity is a metal object sown into his body. It contains the number of a Swiss bank account. He follows this trail and discovers that he was, or is, a CIA assassin. In this ambiguity between "is" and "was" nests the entire ethical plot of the Bourne films. In Bourne's present tense situation, within the *sujet*, there was a time before his accident and loss of memory, and during this period he operated as a soldier robot and killed anyone that he was told to kill. After his gradual recovery of his memory, on the other hand, he positions himself critically vis-a-vis his own past identity. He seeks to become again just a human being—but this turns out, as he painfully realizes, to be impossible. He makes the discovery that the process of education that he has gone through is irreversible, and that the best he can hope for is to reconstruct the logic of this transformation by retracing his steps. In pursuing this aim, Bourne continues to benefit in an ambivalent way from his previous training as it allows him to stay alive.

In the aesthetic element of the chase, the films develop another theme, and another aspect of Bourne's personality, which shows in practice what this training consists in on the level of *intellect*. This is an improbable speed of deliberation. Bourne is not only quick in executing the orders that he gives to himself, he is also quick witted, in the sense of being good at improvisation. He is quick in analyzing the tools, obstacles, and stakes of any given situation. All these reflections are purely pragmatic and operative. They rarely concern ends, or values, but only efficiency. An exception to this means oriented reasoning is an episode in the second film, where in the style of a truth commission, Bourne finds the daughter of a couple, whom he killed. He does so in order to confess this crime to her and let her know the truth of how her parents died. Mostly, however, Bourne's use of his intellect is short term and high speed, concerned with himself, and an immediate situation of danger or opportunity. Mid-way between operational skill and improvisation is the scene in the second film

where he buys and activates a mobile phone, and surreptitiously places it in the pocket of the man he is meeting—a journalist whose phone Bourne knows to be tapped. Now, with this new phone that the journalist did not know he possessed, he finds himself unexpectedly speaking with Bourne, and the frustrated NSA agents are, for a moment, outwitted. Bourne thus lives at the margins of normal life, the life of institutions, families, and *slow speed* thinking. He is a person who is an agent in the double sense of the term. He is employed to do clandestine military work. He is also an agent in the abstract sense of someone who acts and determines himself to act very independently: an agent within a self-designed plot. However, this independence is paradoxical in its ethical implications. His independence is the result of his skills. It is an operational autonomy that he could only have acquired through the type of training that was aimed to make him into an unthinking—and hence far from independent robot. The psychological drama of the Bourne films concerns this conflict between his autonomy of skill (referring to his past) and his autonomy of reflection (rooted in the present).

The principle of spying is being covert—but the spy, in Western countries, also has to exercise her covert activity in a society wedded to principles of legitimacy and transparency. On this question of legitimacy and accountability hinges the closed, hence secret, nature of intelligence work. However, in none of the three films do we find any suggestion that the spies take questions of legitimacy seriously—or at least not in the way of accepting the social *form* of accountability. They will have their own belief in the necessity, and hence moral legitimacy, of what they do, but this is a legitimacy *sub species aeternitatis*, and does not extend to the political legitimacy of democratic checks and balances. It does, more specifically, never include a willingness to provide justifications of oneself to an outside—the outside of society or the public sphere. Hence, intelligence activity is seen in these films as entirely self-defining. This further means that from the point of view of the spies themselves, their work takes place in a realm that is hermetically sealed. This is thus a realm, which derives its norms only from itself and from the exercise of intellect that takes place within it. This complete self-referentiality is a major source of ethical reflection in all three films. We may see an interesting contrast here between them. In the Smiley films, there is not yet any question of accountability. In the ethos of the British mandarin bureaucracy, it seems obvious that all decisions taken by senior civil servants should follow the wisdom of accumulated institutional knowledge—and as if by implication, that this type of institution-internal knowledge should not be made available to public scrutiny. The moral issues that emerge in the Smiley films are therefore directly related to actions executed by individual spies and their manipulation of other people. In *Bourne* and *Homeland*, on the other hand, accountability as a criterion of legitimacy sometimes surfaces, but it is mentioned in passing, cynically, as something to be ignored, or as a deceptive ploy. It is thus assumed in both films that the combined powers of CIA and NSA, with their military support, are in principle unchecked by anything. In *Homeland*, this is reinforced by the sense that any notion of legitimacy is absorbed by a post 9/11 atmosphere of collective urgency. The story unfolds on the inside of the machine made to fight terror. Inside this machine, the daylight of parliamentary politics and conventional legitimacy is entirely shut out (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972)⁶. The loyalties of Kerry, Saul, and Quinn are directed towards their cause and towards their team. They form a clique so tight that political changes around them scarcely affect their work practices. They are bound by a loyalty that is both institutional—since they work for the same agency—and personal, since they are friends. They are further bound by a common commitment, which they understand in

⁶ Following Deleuze and Guattari, I use the term “machine” as a theoretical metaphor for a fixed logic of thought and action, but here in the context of conscious rather than unconscious mental activity, cf. *L'Anti-Oedipe*, Paris, 1972.

the same, sophisticated and intuitive way. Hence, they share the same unscrupulous morality regarding what is allowed in fighting terrorism. Interestingly, it is on this last point that the series ends in the fourth season, as a rift appears between the two otherwise friendly characters Quinn and Kerry over how much they are allowed to do in the name of “the cause”.

Choice and Memory

The temporality of intellect that I examine within spy films arises from scenarios of institutional corruption within these sealed environments. These scenarios have a temporal structure of “training”, which entails a problem of “self”: What, or who, was I before going through training; what or who did I become after receiving training? We can make the ethical stakes of this problem more explicit by turning to Plato and his ethical question of what is involved in choosing a teacher.

The specter of moral corruption is one that preoccupied Plato in different contexts. He discussed what happens to virtue in a corrupt city state. He was also interested in the potentially corrupting effects of teaching. Hence, the problem of intellectual corruption is typically examined by Plato in the context of a young man’s choice of a teacher.

Both in the *Protagoras* and in the *Gorgias*, this teacher plot raises questions of criteria of choice, as the choice turns out to be problematic. It is problematic because of the temporal dimension of these criteria of choice. In fact, the teacher choice displays the structure of a particular skeptical problem, usually referred to as the “Meno paradox”—how can I look for knowledge if I do not already know what to look for? We can formulate the teacher choice in terms, which are at once temporal and evolve from the Meno paradox. The teacher choice thus involves a question of future self-knowledge. How can you know in the present what you will become in the future by subjecting yourself to the instruction of a teacher—if the effect on your soul of this instruction is something that you cannot know in the present?

Similarly, the problem of intellectual socialization that I have examined in spy films involves the ethical question of how one becomes who one is, how one evaluates the self that one has become—but in these films, such questions arise with reference to the *past* rather than the *future*. They concern memory rather than choice. They can be summed up in the questions: What remains of my emotional and intellectual personality outside of the training that I received; with reference to which part of my temporal being, or self, should I seek the criteria for assessing the value of this training? The temporal arc of memory in all of the three sets of films varies according to the relationship that they depict between a present tense of the intellect and a past, which the character can reflect upon. I am interested, first, in whether the use of intellect in these films is encapsulated within an ongoing present; and, second in the question to what extent does the spy, as an individual, have access to a personal history? This personal temporality might be in tension with the present tense of operational thinking. This is especially so when operational intellect is exercised within the temporal context of a self-sufficient, ongoing present, in which the past has only limited relevance.

Memory and Reality

The characters Bourne and Smiley are completely different from Kerry and her colleagues in one respect. They are both figures who are dominated by memory and they are both melancholically fixated on personal loyalties. The emotional loyalties and attachments of Smiley and Bourne are, for both of them, fused with profoundly personal, even narcissistic, images, and ideas. It is this narcissism, and the acts of memory in which

it is expressed, which also, paradoxically, protect Smiley and Bourne from the excesses of office homeliness, and insulation from the world outside⁷. Smiley was the *protégée* of his boss Control, who in turn was a father figure for him. He is the hapless husband of a wife, Ann, who is wittier, wealthier and more free spirited than he is. It is an improbable match, which places him in a position where he is always, somehow, in her shadow. The plot of *Tinker Taylor* spells this out. The Soviet mole seduces Ann in order to destabilize Smiley. In the course of fighting the Soviet agent, Karla, and detecting the mole's identity, Smiley therefore has to revisit the emotional site of his own vulnerabilities. Even as he moves forward in his investigation, even as he catches the mole, this progress throws him back into his own, intimate and painful, immediate past. This backward looking gaze is also directly inscribed into the plot. The main story is preceded by a preamble, in which Smiley's boss Control organizes an ill-fated attempt to recruit a Czech defector in order to investigate whether there is a "mole within the Circus". When the operation fails, Control retires, and shortly thereafter dies. Most of the remaining story is told in a back and forth montage between Smiley's ongoing investigation and a series of flashbacks. Throughout, Smiley is on the track of Control's previous investigation. Between Control and Ann, Smile appears as a figure who lives only very slightly for himself—and this very little that he does for himself, he does by his wits, or intelligence, and his intelligence, in turn, is fuelled, powerfully, by his memory. At one point, when questioning Control's emissary to Czekoslowakia, a certain Prideaux, Smiley seeks to enter the other man's emotions by quoting to him from an old letter: "I can quote the odd line from memory". Prideaux bitterly retorts: "you are proud of your memory, aren't you?" Smiley is, indeed, proud of his total recall of facts and of words. At the beginning *Smiley's People* we see him caught in a reverie in which past, now dead; friends appear to him from beyond the grave, triggering memories of long forgotten intrigues. Smiley is marginal in relation to everyday life precisely in terms of this life by memory.

After his near drowning, and following his amnesia and then recovery, Bourne acquires a new vantage point upon his past existence. Whereas before the accident he had been trained not to have remorse, now remorse is all that he has. He becomes a person whose only actual remaining human trait is memory: First the memory of what he was supposed to do as a secret soldier, then the memory of his dead girlfriend, Maria Kreuz, finally, in the third film, the memory of his training. The *Bourne* trilogy is the almost tragic journey of a quest on the part of a person who has wedded his whole existence to an identity—given to him by a state institution—an identity, which he comes to reject and to distrust. The aim of his quest will be to regain some of his own previous identity—and thereby also a sense of his own lost humanity. This quest fails. While Bourne demonstrates a degree of humanization in the course of the series, as his body ages and decays, as his fake youthful charm is rubbed out, as his attitude is hardened and his mind becomes increasingly obsessive, this humanity is negatively defined and the identity that he recovers is not the identity *he might have had* as the naïve and young David Webb, who voluntarily subjected himself to the "program" in order to "save American lives". It is the identity of someone who went through a series of irreversible processes and who can now only look at life from the point of view of that irreversibility.

In *Bourne*, the Platonic teaching paradox is played out in a bitter tone of invective. Whereas Smiley only ruefully, and as if absentmindedly, seems aware of having lost something by becoming a man of memory, Bourne enters a spiral of ever increasing incrimination of those who "taught him". Here the teaching paradox does not concern the future value of the person that I will become, but the impossibility, dialectically, to value

⁷ In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze suggests that narcissism designates a vital and primary state of mind.

what I lost by going down one path, rather than another, in life. There is thus no vantage point from which Bourne could access a view of himself as the David Webb he would, counterfactually, have been, had he *not* become Jason Bourne.

Ethics of Intellect

Bourne's obsessive concern with his past is quite importantly a concern with something that *actually* happened to him and to others. This is therefore a concern with reality, the reality of what he did and of what was done to him. Just as Smiley's reconstruction of the mole's past actions in *Tinker Taylor* is an attempt at holding on to events that actually took place up until Control's demise, Bourne is chained to the thought of discovering how, concretely, he was made to be who he became. Melancholy memory thus functions in both *Tinker Taylor* and in the *Bourne* trilogy as the site of a reference to reality and as a means of, ethically speaking, holding on to reality.

In this exercise of intellect commanded by memory, reflection is referential and not inventive (Kripke, 1980)⁸. It is concerned not with possibilities, scenarios, or strategies. It is concerned with a series of distinct and unique events that took place at a particular time and were done by specific individuals. It may be that in order to understand these events one will have to understand the kind of scenario in which certain individuals were motivated to act in a certain way, following a certain strategy. Bourne is able to understand the logic of his own psychological training. Smiley is able to understand the tactics of the mole in *Tinker Taylor* and he is able to understand that his Soviet rival Karla has decided to send his daughter to France in *Smiley's People*. This kind of retrospective reconstruction of motive is very different, however, from the kind of tactical, continuous tracking of the enemy, and step by step deliberation which mirrors that of the enemy himself. This kind of tactical tracking that *Homeland* is devoted to is entirely forward looking as its focus is, not a specific scenario, but the ever shifting horizons of a moving target.

Returning to Arendt's notion of intellectual corruption from her essay on Eichmann, all these intelligent intelligence characters fail morally. They do so not because they fail adequately to *understand* what they do, as Arendt claimed Eichmann did. They fail because they succeed in letting themselves be absorbed within a logic of action and thought, which both includes and effaces their existential self-relation. Their use of intellect, their expression of emotion, their relationships of affect and concern all come to be oriented by a logic that effectively excludes the subject's existence outside this sphere of tactical intellect. Now, the only exception to this process of existential self-effacement appears to be memory, since memory is a *referential* relation to the world. It is a relation, which absolutely negates the intellectual mode in which the subject calculates scenarios for one's own possible actions. Memory thus appears as an ethical compensation for the intellect in cases where the intellect is exclusively employed as a tool, within a logic over which the subject has no control—herein lies the parallel with Eichmann in Arendt's analysis.

This distinction resembles familiar distinctions between ends and means rationality or between instrumental and non-instrumental reason—as we know from Weber (1921-1922) and Horkheimer (1947)—but my distinction is less general. It follows the Platonic psychological theme of our various, alternative, morally charged uses of intellect. In these films we find a use of intellect, which is defined by a detachment both from the past and from the ethical person whose intellect is in use. Memory is by contrast an ethical

⁸ This distinction owes something to the distinction between meaning and reference in Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, 1980), but the relationship is one of analogy not of actual borrowing.

accomplishment—also in a two-fold sense. Memory brings the subject back to a domain of autonomy (my memories concern me); second, memory confronts the subject with its own moral responsibilities: Smiley's loyalty towards Control, and his regret of not being able to love, or to leave, Ann; Bourne's remorse for past crimes.

Kerry's brief moments of regret are on the other hand always shown in the present tense, and never as an overarching motive in her actions. Hence, in *Homeland*, nearly all the intellectual activities that we see the main characters engaged in are forward looking. The focus of their activity, or the focus of the series, is always the next step that the enemy is likely to make. Saul, Kerry, and Quinn thus live within a fleeting present absolutely oriented towards an imminent future in which the enemy will act. They do not allow any of their own thoughts, and in particular, their own emotional attachments, to distract them, by referring to something outside of the anti-terror machine. Inside the machine, all energy is concentrated on the ongoing operation. No single thing can be said to be irreversible beyond the abstract notion of the *task* as it is formulated inside the machine. This is a mind set in which the internal self-governing process of the task allows the characters to exclude, not only themselves and their emotions from their own lives (as is the case with Smiley and Bourne), but also to insulate themselves from the moral system, which governs the society in which they live.

In *Bourne* and the Smiley films, by contrast, melancholic attachments of memory serve as a reference to an outside world of moral responsibilities, and therefore as a check on the self-referential nature of their intellectual work. It allows the characters of Bourne and Smiley to retain some sense of a moral limitation—even as Bourne continues to be ruthless and Smiley continues to be callous. Inside the anti-terror machine of *Homeland* by contrast, there appears to be nothing beyond the machine, nothing that would set limits to the logic of reasoning that it imposes. *Homeland* thus describes a much more profoundly unethical situation, a dystopian place in which characters have forgotten how to *measure their thinking with the outside*.

Returning to Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, we may relate this difference between *Homeland* and the two other films to the passage that I quoted before. After discussing the loss of a category of memory from the vocabulary of philosophy, Arendt continues with the following political, and existential, conclusion:

Quite apart from the consequences of this loss for all strictly political philosophy, it is obvious that what went out with memory—*sedes animi est in memoria*—was a sense of the thoroughly temporal character of human nature and human existence [...] (Arendt, 1978, p. 117)

The ethics of spy films amplify and demonstrate this thesis that Arendt attributes to Augustine: Human existence is temporal before it is anything else, due to the central place of memory within the soul, or as Arendt might say, within human existence. This is why the ethical stakes of the subject's uses of intellect come to be measured with the criterion of its use of memory.

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⁹ The latin phrase “*sedes animi est in memoria*”, freely translates as “the soul has its foundation in memory”.

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