

Farewell

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue



The French spy picture *Farewell* is literate, complex and thoughtful. It's based on the true story of the Russian spy Sergei Gregoriev, code name "Farewell," whose activities in the early 1980s laid the groundwork for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The movie is both a gripping thriller and a witty exploration of the intricacies and implications of living a lie.

The film was directed by Christian Carion, who coadapted Serguei Kostine's book *Bonjour Farewell* with Eric Raynaud. It stars two filmmakers who happen to be marvelous actors: Serbian director Emir Kusturica plays Gregoriev, and French director Guillaume Canet is Pierre Froment, a Parisian engineer working in Moscow who begins ferrying Gregoriev's secrets as a favor to his boss, who has links to the French secret service. Gregoriev, a highly placed colonel, is willing to use his access to astonishing information about Soviet moles in the U.S., which French president François Mitterrand (Philippe Magnan) conveys to President Reagan (Fred Ward, in an entertaining little performance).

The movie centers equally on Sergei, suave improviser, and Pierre, who's alternately appalled, terrified and fascinated by the unlikely situation he finds himself in. Canet

looks like a café intellectual in his wire rims and beard, but there's a wariness in his eyes; he always looks as if he's out of his depth. When he's asked to smuggle a Minox camera from the West so that Sergei can copy files, an unnerved Pierre wants to quit, but Sergei talks him into hanging on; he likes having so improbable a handler—he calls Pierre "the perfect little spy"—and he likes Pierre. They form an unorthodox friendship as Pierre brings Sergei books of poetry and records of *chanteurs* from Paris, along with Queen albums for his rebellious adolescent son. In the necessary solitude of espionage, Sergei sees Pierre as his only confidant. And Pierre begins to value Gregoriev's safety; he urges him to defect with his family before the Soviet government discovers him.

When Sergei begins sleeping with a new co-worker to ease his slipping in and out of her office—she becomes so vulnerable to his charm that she swallows his off-the-top excuses for riffling through her desk—the infidelity becomes both an extension of his double life and a metaphor for it. Carion and Raynaud make ingenious use of this idea: spying on his wife, Sergei witnesses her encounter with another man in a car, and we can't tell whether it's evidence of a dalliance or more espionage. Meanwhile, Pierre has to keep his continued interactions with Sergei a secret from his own wife. Pierre is presented to us as an innocent spy, but of course there's no such thing, and the complications that his relationship with Sergei throw into his life keep reminding us—and him—that he's turned himself into a professional liar like his friend.

Yet Sergei possesses a certain claim to (relative) innocence. He's the singular spy whose motives are pure, who commits treason out of a patriot's agenda. He resists Pierre's pleas to defect because he's a committed communist, a true believer who wants to bring down the system not for personal gain or out of ideological opposition but because he bemoans what's happened to it—the ideals that fueled it were betrayed by petty bureaucrats. What Sergei envisions is a parallel to the original Russian Revolution: the breakdown of an institution that will clear the path for a brand-new revolution.

Carion is skillful at mixing tones. Sergei has a habit of leaping into Pierre's car that's both unsettling and hilarious. When Sergei is detained by the authorities, Pierre makes contact with his family, who naturally deny any knowledge of this French national. But then Sergei's son shadows Pierre and jumps into his vehicle at a deserted intersection, leading a nerve-jangled Pierre to comment that this sort of behavior clearly runs in the Gregoriev family. This is a classical use of comedy—not as relief but to enhance suspense. The final act contains a border-crossing escapade

that is almost unbearably tense. *Farewell* is one of a handful of the summer's films that's still in your head the morning after you see it.