

## The Gentleman's a Killer. Introducing Bond<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Bond History

The following paper attempts to deliver an introduction to the filmic world of James Bond.

When British Secret Agent 007 entered the Big Screen in 1962, he had already enjoyed a thriving history in the book market. Ian Fleming's series had already seen eight novels and one short story anthology, and at the end of his life, the former journalist and assistant to the Director of Naval Intelligence was able to see his creation move to film, yet he didn't live to witness it come to its great success starting with 1964's *Goldfinger*.

Since then, new Bond films have been made in short intervals, with only one larger break between 1989 and 1995, the gap bridging *Licence to Kill* and *GoldenEye*. Bond has become the longest running motion picture series in history, and the most successful one, too. 007 has become an institution, a number to count on, indeed.

In the midst of history, the figure of James Bond is standing straight as the British Intelligence Agent, a gentleman with the Licence to Kill, a lover of style and of women, in short, Mr. Kiss Kiss Bang Bang.

While the figures of Bond, M, Leiter and Moneypenny remained the same, their faces and characters did not defy time, neither did the confrontations -- they adapted, due to the necessities of cinema and the demands of history and contemporary culture. Not unlike the *Austin Powers* scenario, a James Bond movie is always a travel through time, a conduit in time linking the old gentleman fighting for the Empire with the modern-day cool action hero. The only center of the storm, the only permanent and aging character - until now - has been 007's father-like chief gadget creator, Q, portrayed by Desmond Llewellyn.

Bond, in contrast, rarely shows any signs of change and experience, of memory: With only two real exceptions, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* and *Licence to Kill*, and an assumed change in current tendencies, Bond is not a round character, boldly lacking real traces of humanity. Both exceptions, by the way, are great and bold films, yet both no true Bond movies either. They show a Bond who's a human being capable of showing true, unmasked emotions, capable of experiencing horror and stun. Yet that certainly isn't Connery's Bond, neither Moore's.

The character of Bond, as he is visible in the movies, has seen five official incarnations. The Connery films have introduced a hard-edged, yet not humorless, and undoubtedly not charmless, but still cold-blooded assassin as portrayed by Sean Connery. Connery's Bond is clearly a killer, not a loose cannon, but a precise worker who will stop at nothing, and for nobody, until the job is finished. Everything is done for King and Country. Connery always is cool and detached, the phantom killer, a good-looking guy in a suit, he *is* the suit, he *is* the exterior -- business is business.

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George Lanzenby's intermezzo in the sixth film, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, was too short to really establish an individual style, yet some attempts can be seen at humanizing Bond, providing a softer side for someone who had already become a stereotype.

Moore's Bond goes for the pleasure, his is the world of the seventies and mid-eighties, the time for which the sixties had paved the road, he is coming most close to Austin Powers. Bond still was a killer, yet his edge seemed lost.

Dalton then seems to take everything personal. His approach may be said to come closer to Connery's again, while at the same time trying to show a more human and affected Bond, and in his second film, *Licence to Kill*, even a renegade Bond, not on an official mission but on a private vendetta.

After that came the five-year break, until Pierce Brosnan was freed from his contract to play the private eye *Remington Steele*, where he already showed a kind of humorous, but nevertheless Bond-like approach. His performance has become the closest to Connery's yet, colder, more concentrated on efficiency. He still is a gentleman, but in a businessman-like way; somehow the Nineties version of 007, deliberately defying the consolatory and more charming Bond of the Seventies and the Eighties, and almost desperately going back to the roots in the redefinition of a now almost thirty years old movie series, the necessary concentration on the essentials, the delimiting from today's flood of action films, going back to the more human Bond of the novels even.

Brosnan somehow has come to claim a middle position between those two extremes. There's one shot right in the beginning of *The World is Not Enough*, at the bank in Bilbao, right when he has just shot someone: A furious glance into the audience, a wild, determined and dead serious look. No more games, no more Mr. Nice Guy. Yet then again, he actually feels sympathy for the female killer, portrayed by Maria Grazia Cucinotta -- even offering her refuge, and then, a sudden flush of terror in his face when she decides to rather kill herself. He also sympathizes with Elektra, maybe this Bond is indeed able to fall in love, to actually "take pleasure in great beauty", to not only toy with the girl and exploit her for his purposes. That's also one motivation for his going after Carver in *Tomorrow Never Dies* -- to take revenge for the girl Carver had killed, a previous lover of Bond's. Connery's Bond wouldn't have dreamt of doing that, the death of his colleague Paula in *Thunderball* seems to leave him unaffected, he's going after Largo just because of business.

Yet strangely, each Bond makes sense in the world he is set in. Each reflects the cultural attributes in the "real world", they -- in turn -- reflect the world. The difference between today's Bond and the Bond of the past lies not within Bond himself, it lies within the context of contemporary culture. Compared with other films of the respective time, Bond always fits in -- he follows the trend, adapts to the flux of time, yet still, he also retains certain attributes that make him different, make him special, make him 007, the Gentleman who is a Killer.

Let us now take a look at some typical elements of a Bond movie.

## 2. Typical Elements of a Bond Movie

### 2.1. Genre

Bond films are no real action films. A Bond film is -- first and for all -- a spy story. The story is important, and it does have a purpose. Contrary to the flood of action movies around nowadays, a Bond story moves around the globe, staying true to the jet-setter feeling which was so important for the first films. The general incidence, the amount of action elements

remains roughly the same in each Bond film -- it's not just explosions, car chases and fights. What has changed, however, are the technical options, both for special and visual effects, as well as for story elements -- technology has advanced throughout the years, and naturally, the explosions have gotten bigger, yet the stakes have remained the same, more or less.

The degree of violence has remained constant. *Tomorrow Never Dies* is no less violent a film than *Thunderball* -- the photography, however, has changed. Violence in the Connery movies tends to be more stylized, more distant, more abstract. People die, yet there's usually not much blood, not much aftereffects. Large-scale battles, be they underwater, on the surface, in an underground lair or in outer space, are a most effective way to stylize violence -- the larger the scope, the lesser the brutality gets visible. The people who die, die an almost anonymous death, like the poor security guard in an episode of *Star Trek*.

Beginning with *Licence to Kill*, death in Bond films is beginning to get ugly. We can see into the eyes of a truly insane killer when the character played by Benicio del Toro tries to kill Bond in the exploding monastery, we see Sanchez, played by Robert Davi, die a painful death. It's not anymore Largo killed by a bullet, or Drax pushed into outer space, or Osato falling into a pit with piranhas. This time, we can see into the face of death, we can later see Elektra lying on her death-bed, and Renard dead, killed by the plutonium bolt. Death is coming closer, thus bringing the impact of violence closer to the audience. And both Dalton's and Brosnan's Bond are actually able to show a reaction to it, they show traces of humanity.

A very important element of a Bond film is science fiction, as mostly visible in the more directly space-based adventures of *You Only Live Twice*, *Moonraker* and *GoldenEye* -- yet science fiction isn't something restricted to outer space. Most gadgets are extrapolations of today's possibilities -- which is maybe the essence of a science fiction background. Nor is the ethical element missing which is the very soul of science fiction: *Moonraker* may be the best example for that. Bond is fighting a Nazi-minded enemy trying to repopulate the planet with a new Herrenvolk. Bond is the one to foil that plot, saving humanity.

Bond films -- another key element of science fiction, especially if you think of shows like *Star Trek* and *The Outer Limits* -- can also be scenarios of possible threats to come, often foreseeing new possibilities for evil to rise. S.P.E.C.T.R.E. is the incarnation of the terrorist threat, and with today's experiences, not such a wild idea anymore. The threat posed by globally operating business cartels, if controlled by a madman, is illustrated in films like *You Only Live Twice*, *Moonraker*, *A View To A Kill* and the two latest releases. The threat from outer space, as in *Moonraker* and *GoldenEye*, can clearly be seen as a not too unbelievable future scenario. A Bond film can also work as kind of a justification for the continued existence of agencies like MI6 and the CIA. Today it's not the Empire which has to be protected, as in the Fleming novels, it is the world in its entirety.

Romance -- of course -- is another element of a Bond story. But it is rarely love, it is rather, to quote Austin Powers, "frequent promiscuous sex" -- true romance is rare in Bond films, for that, Fleming's creation is too pragmatic, too dark, too much of a spy -- with above mentioned exceptions.

## 2.2. Enemies

The enemies featured in a Bond movie are of a rather distinct kind when compared with those of other films. Everything, of course, is bigger than life, and the evil of Bond's opponents is usually neither explained nor questioned -- they are the bad guys, and that's it. They want to possess the world or destroy it, just like that. Maybe that's the most honest approach possible, somehow, and it surely does make a statement about humanity. Fleming's world may be a

shadowy one, with Bond walking the thin red line between two extremes, whose existence is always stressed, though while there may be shades of gray, there definitely exists goodness, and, in turn, also evil.

The bad guy is rather a solitary adversary, the already mentioned megalomaniac. The films are careful not to portray a specific country as the enemy -- not even the Russians. In that, they deliberately depart from the books. The enemy is rather S.P.E.C.T.R.E., the "Special Executive for Counterintelligence, Terror, Extortion", and not SMERSH, the Russian KGB-wing "Смерть Шпионам", "Death to Spies", having existed also in real life. SMERSH is only really mentioned in *The Living Daylights*, but then, it is already a renegade project, outdated, both Bond and General Gogol working to stop it.

Though often perceived as a product of the Cold War, the Bond films more often show cooperation than confrontation between the West and the Russians -- this is true from the very beginning, and in an often quite stark contrast to the novels.

The classic enemy, rather, has either German or Asian attributes. Dr. No is a German/Chinese mixed breed, and Fleming favored hybrids as adversaries. *Goldfinger* features a Chinese assassin (as does *Austin Powers*), and Drax has a definite Nazi agenda. This may be due to the British background of the series -- Britain, of course, had to battle the Germans in World War Two, and Fleming vigorously protested against making West Germany an ally after the war. The other front, of course, was Asia, but this time not in the war, but in the agony of the dying Empire. The Chinese as an enemy also made sense if collaboration with Russia was achieved -- China being an arch-enemy of Russia, and also of the former USSR. Thus it is the more revealing how times have changed, or are believed to be in need for change, when China becomes an ally in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Even more poignantly, the enemy is suddenly someone completely different: An Englishman, pure and simple.

### 2.3. *Texture and Theme*

On the thematic level, besides espionage, action, violence and romance, there are yet other elements. One of the most obvious being the Exotic, something different from the usual perspective, something in contrast to what defines the everyday life of the audience. In the early movies, this is, firstly, the fast-paced and expensive lifestyle of air travel, Vodka Martinis and women, of beaches and islands. The exotic in the first movies are the Bahamas, Turkey and the Balkans, the US and Japan. The Far East is still *en vogue* today, but what's new, is the area of the former USSR. Space has been popular all the time, as are skiing areas and the sea.

The Romantic is a very strong part of the Bond experience, partly due to the influence of the exotic, but also due to the appreciation of an old-fashioned gentleman ideal, as well as the romanticizing of the spy world as such. But mostly, the Romantic is invoked through the music, which helps in stylizing both the action and the characters. Bond music has found two very worthwhile composers, John Barry having contributed to twelve Bond films, and David Arnold, having scored the latest two. There have been seven other composers, each only having scored one movie, amongst them Monty Norman who composed the well-known Theme for the series. John Barry, provides a Jazz-like quality for his music, as well as a strong move towards the romantic, yet he is rather a master of understatement. David Arnold, however, prefers a dense and action-laden score.

### 3. Bond as a Cultural Phenomenon

Bond is moving through time, reflecting the cultural and political world in each of the cinematic installments. Something that big cannot really stay unaffected by what's going on around it, it thrives on it, and it has to, in order to survive.

Make no mistake. Bond is always contemporary. The classic Bond and the modern Bond are one and the same -- they are rooted in the culture producing them. That's why Bond, though keeping some basic premises, is not really old-fashioned. It doesn't anymore have the smell of the sixties or the fifties. A lot has been done to "contemporize" Bond, to renew the series with each outing. That can be seen from the title sequences, from the specific interpretation delivered by the actor, from the photography, production design and effects -- which, by the way, are the only really old-fashioned element, as they rely less heavily on computer animation and more on solid special effects and models. It can also be seen in regard to how certain cultural concepts are dealt with in each film, especially, *topoi* like Race, Class and Gender.

Not only through the constant influx of fresh actors will the Bond phenomenon retain an ever-changing, ever-adapting contemporaneity. Some constants remain. A basic story construction of good girl, bad girl and dead girl; of a clear-cut evil madman and a British Secret Service combating them with the best weapon they have: An anti-hero gentleman killer with the family motto of *orbis non sufficit* – the world is not enough, with a license to kill and a never sated desire for women. Though everything around that might be subject to change, one thing seems to be clear: James Bond will return.

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