The Cultural Life of James Bond

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Published by Amsterdam University Press


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10. Global Agency between Bond and Bourne: *Skyfall* and James Bond in Comparison to the Jason Bourne Film Series

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Abstract

*Skyfall* (2012) signals a crisis in global espionage in a post-9/11 era of schizophrenic digital terror. James Bond and his enemy are both internally excluded from their agency—MI6—and this “abjection” leads to terrorist revenge and sovereign reaffirmation. The latter involves a survival test for 007’s vulnerable body while simultaneously recovering a national identity for the United Kingdom. In this sense, James Bond mirrors Jason Bourne, the ex-CIA agent in the *Jason Bourne* film series. Bourne undergoes a similar abjection yet becomes neither terrorist nor sovereign but instead a symptom of perpetual mind-games. This chapter compares Bond to Bourne to enable a cognitive mapping of the twenty-first-century espionage genre and its global system of sovereignty and abjection.

Keywords: Jason Bourne; *Skyfall*; global cinema; sovereignty; abjection; agency

If the success of *Skyfall* (UK/USA: Sam Mendes, 2012) celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the James Bond series and revitalized it for another half-century, this longevity could be viewed on two axes. First, synchronically, its brand power has already become “too big to fail” despite the ups and downs of individual entries in the series. Audiences know and repeatedly enjoy what they can expect from this longest film franchise. The Bondian narrative follows the flowchart of “moves” with archetypal characters: M’s assignment of a mission to Bond, the Villain’s threat, Bond’s reactions, the

Verheul, J. (ed.), *The Cultural Life of James Bond: Specters of 007*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020

doi 10.5117/9789462982185_CH10
Woman’s seduction, the Villain’s capture and torture of Bond, Bond’s escape and victory, and his convalescence with the Woman. Along this syntactic line, the semantic Manichean oppositions between characters, ideologies, and values are arranged in a quasi-mythical, structuralist fashion, with sexist, imperialist, and phallic codes crossing hermeneutically (Eco 1966, 37-39). Second, diachronically, the Bond series has never ceased evolving through the Cold War against the larger backdrop of the British Empire’s decline and its global Anglo-American remodeling. As a “militainment” that meets societal expectations about war, media, and popular culture (Stahl 2009), it has flexibly adapted to the ages of the nuclear crisis, the Iraq War, 9/11, communist and post-communist militancy. Moreover, the agent with the “license to kill” has incarnated a modern fantasy of sovereign masculinity, stylish and high living as well as fast shooting and sexually liberated, while having been played by six actors. In short, 007 has been viable as “a variable and mobile signifier rather than one that can be fixed as unitary and constant in its signifying functions and effects” (Bennett and Woollacott 2003, 31).

Skyfall, however, leaves room for revisiting this general account in light of new challenges brought by both today’s globalized world and the spy genre. Bond here, in the beginning, undergoes the symbolic death of being inadvertently but unsympathetically abandoned by M and MI6, whose role with murky methods is questioned in its turn and almost cast out of the government. The rest of the narrative unfolds the struggle of Bond, M, and MI6 at once to restore their endangered identity before their possible real death (thus all happens between the double death, symbolic and real). The mission given to Bond by M after his return is not just another counter-villain operation, but a sort of “qualifying exam” to test their necessity in order to reconfirm their value. This self-reaffirmation is all the more tough yet urgent as the antagonist turns out to be a former MI6 agent, so to speak, an ex-child of M and a deserted brother of Bond. Moreover, this villain hacks the agency like an externalized insider who exposes its dirty business. In sum, the sovereign system generates its abject remnants, who may then become either a sovereign agent back or a terrorist one, either rejoining or rejecting the very system. The post-Cold War enemy of the digitally globalized agency is nothing but its double, and one’s subjectivity precariously oscillates between sovereignty and abjection. Bond’s unusually aging body materializes this vulnerability with little leisure for pleasure while trying to escape immaterial informatics and fight the enemy behind it physically in his Scottish childhood home to reclaim his identity as an MI6 agent.
Indeed, Bond’s self-reflection in this global backdrop is as desperate as timely. Now given the Brexit vote that revealed Britain’s internal and external schisms, the final scene of Bond’s return to London as a nationally reintegrated global hero may provoke all the more questions about his agency, nationality, and cosmopolitanism. However, these questions have been raised and addressed throughout the Bond series. What I propose then is to trace how Bond’s sociopolitical subjectivity has resonated with the series’ historically global nature, and to highlight the line between sovereignty and abjection that has become ever more blurred since Daniel Craig’s introduction in *Casino Royale* (UK/Czech Republic/USA/Germany/Bahamas: Martin Campbell, 2006). Importantly, Craig’s tenure has been influenced by the contemporary spy genre which has challenged 007 to renew its name value and differentiate its direction too. This interaction may tell much about today’s global *agency* in both the senses of the term: the sovereign organization, and subjectivity in action for a mission.

**The Cold War as Already Post-Historical**

It is noteworthy that although Ian Fleming’s early 1950s Bond novels emerged right in the wake of the Cold War, his 1960s sequels introduced the swift shift to an imaginary post-Cold War world with sprouting effects of globalization. Hinting at a thaw in the Cold War, the source of enemies changed from SMERSH (*Smiert Spionam* [Death to Spies]), the most secret department of the Soviet Union, to SPECTRE (Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terror, Revenge, and Extortion), an international criminal and terrorist syndicate. The latter is an NGO unaligned with any nation or political ideology, a borderless assembly of freelance villains only aiming to acquire power and wealth through terrorism. Exploiting the fragile relations between the East and the West, it holds them to ransom for private gain and carries out its threat to bring global catastrophes (Bennett and Woollacott 2003, 19-23). In a Marxist sense, SPECTRE then appears like the “spectre” of neoliberal terrorism or terrorist neoliberalism haunting the world as explicitly shown in *Spectre* (UK/USA/Austria/Mexico/Italy/Morocco: Sam Mendes, 2015). This fictional fusion of two oppositional facets of globalization, i.e., neoliberalism and terrorism, even betrays their real proximity in their pursuit of private greed through their supralegal modus operandi. In effect, the globally operating MI6 transcends the law in order to protect the order of neoliberal globalism. SPECTRE is thus like the mirror image of MI6 reflected from the outside of the latter’s system.
Interestingly, the Bond film series adopts the SPECTRE formula from the inception with *Dr. No* (UK: Terence Young, 1962) under the pressure of the film industry to depoliticize Bond, thereby maximizing worldwide profits. This widens the cultural spectrum of the Bond character with multiple access points, without ideologically pigeonholing him as the guardian of a big cause like freedom or equality. Above all, he appears as a traditional upper-class English gentleman: white, chivalrous, courteous, humorous, sporting, and patriotic. However, he is also a trans-Atlantic hero whose British origins are offset by American classlessness and openness, leading “the first truly global media phenomena of the modern age, crossing boundaries of language, social background, ethnicity, and culture” comparable to Coca-Colonization or McDonaldization (Chapman 2005, 138-40). While this “international Mr. Fix-It who just happens to be British” is still “a protector of Western interests” (141), the Westernized global hegemony seems to indicate not so much contradiction as mutual reinforcement between the national and cosmopolitan Bond, his Britishness and global appeal.

To amplify further, on the one hand, his Britishness lingers nostalgically on the conservative imagery of an elitist, nationalistic England: in Fleming’s words, “a world of tennis courts and lily ponds, and kings and queens, of London, of people being photographed with pigeons on their heads in Trafalgar Square,” and of people who “still climb Everest and beat plenty of sports and win Nobel Prizes” (Chapman 2007, 29). But on the other hand, Bond embodies an emerging fantasy of luxurious consumption in the society of the spectacle after the UK’s imperial decline, breaking free from austerity and moving toward moral fluidity. He is a walking department store, displaying tasty food, nice clothes, brand-name goods, and technological gadgetry. He is a jet-setting free trader of sexual encounters and erotic adventures with multinational beauties in exotic locations. As if to watch a series of commercials or softcore porn, spectators are titillated to experience by proxy his capitalistic hedonism that is endlessly explored in a single global market of material splendor and sexual drives. That both Bond and *Playboy* were created in 1953 is coincidental yet convincing evidence to the cutting-edge “ethos of easy, free, open sexuality” in the backdrop of such easy, free, open consumerism (Chapman 2007, 31). In a nutshell, Bond is a playboy spy who transgresses laws and taboos while protecting the world as a global pleasure dome that represents his mindset and lifestyle shared or envied by his contemporaries.

The point is that Bond seamlessly mingles local anachronism with the global zeitgeist. Not rendered obsolete, his British legacy is updated as Anglo-American hegemony that sustains the global frame of transnational
mobility and multicultural consumption. And yet it also underlies a new privileged place taken by the happy few in this classless frame. Capable but cruel in work and attractive but unattached in love, Bond is a winner in the modernity of meritocratic professionalism and sexual liberation. His hegemonic power typifies the collective spirit of the age precisely because it is desired by many but realized by few. Moreover, his “rebellious streak and less deferential attitude toward his chief” (Chapman 2005, 138) does not imply serious dissidence but just his free spirit, independence, and individualism which are allowed and even valued within the liberal democratic system—he is like “a cocky star student irritating his stuffy teachers” (Smith 2016, 153). His suprareligious sovereignty for the cause of patriotic service and global policing—the essential motif of the spy genre—may then function as an umbrella for individual desires and gratifications, which he can pursue at liberty insofar as this capitalistic world system is defended from its spectral attackers. In this sense, the Bond films of the Cold War era prefigure the post-Cold War tendency of apolitical globalism. The global agent is already post-historical, with ideological seriousness left behind a capitalistic world of thrilling actions and teasing sensations.

**Increasing Globalism and Reflexivity Around the Millennial Turn**

In the 1990s, Pierce Brosnan as Bond accelerates this “end-of-history” tendency after the real end of the Cold War. While a major threat still comes from Russia, it takes the form of the post-communist Russian mafia that exploits a flourishing black market as well as unstable local governments transitioning into global capitalism. Also, although China as the world's leading communist power is in conflict with Taiwan in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (UK/USA: Roger Spottiswoode, 1997), Bond teams up with a Chinese agent against the global villain who is a Western, power-mad media mogul. In short, the line between old friends and foes is blurred as ideological politics hardly matters. Enemies appear as the invisible hand of a global market for crimes, a power-controlling extra-legal Big Brother. And while Bond's patriotic and global sovereignty resonates with Tom Clancy’s high-tech novels and films such as *Patriot Games* (USA: Phillip Noyce, 1992) and *Clear and Present Danger* (USA: Philip Noyce, 1994), global blockbusters that flexibly use the motif of espionage, even a comedy like *True Lies* (USA: James Cameron, 1994), trigger 007’s depoliticization further in a spectacular fashion of media entertainment (Chapman 2007, 249). Bond's world now
shows bungee jumping, computer hacking, new sports cars, and a female M, who even calls him “a sexist, misogynist dinosaur, a relic of the Cold War” in the way of recognizing the critiques of the Bond series from the liberal democratic perspective of “political correctness.” In other words, the series has long been developed to the point of reflecting creative and critical challenges to it and co-opting them for its survival. To leave a self-critical room is even a marketing strategy as shown in an advertising copy: “Is there still a place in the modern world for a Secret Agent like 007” (Chapman 2007, 252)?

In the era of Craig’s new millennial Bond, this self-reflexivity is not jokingly sprinkled but seriously embedded in the series’ engagement with global terrorism. *Casino Royale* highlights the linked issues of global security and economy, showing that an international cabal led by stateless paymaster Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen) finances terrorist organizations and African freedom fighters. So, while he is implied to have conspired with al-Qaeda in engineering 9/11, what matters is not just a single bomb-maker but a big picture of terrorist networking backed by wealthy sponsors with connections to the world of high finance. This picture is all the more shadowy because the black market of terrorism is no longer detached from the official financial sector prospering through dynamic globalization. Sure enough, *Le Chiffre* means the cipher or the number, “a stand-in variable, a system of encoding that signifies meaning, but meaning that remains absent and undecipherable” (Omry 2010, 170). This spectral evil reflects the verso of globalization and its internalized external surplus, raising hysterical anxieties about the invisible complexity of the millennial world’s operating system.

Bond’s body is reformulated accordingly. He can cope with these anxieties technologically, but once stripped off tech gear, his body is all the more natural and raw, tough and gritty, showing off hegemonic masculinity realistically. Conversely, he is exposed to globally erupting danger, with the scar of technology inscribed on his flesh and its masculinity becoming vulnerable. Le Chiffre’s sadistic torture poses castration threat to Bond’s well-trained male body which is taken out of the law as if it were abandoned like “waste,” in Le Chiffre’s word, by his agency and country that might consider him as expendable. He is degraded, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) would say, to the animal-like “bare life” that is deprived of the right to protect biopolitical subjectivity and thus can be killed with impunity in the state of exception to normal law, which is suspended. His body is no longer the slick, classy, unharmed container of a stable identity secured by the state sovereignty, but a “precarious life” disposable any time. If Bond’s law-bound submission to M’s authority is masochistic in a socially acceptable way, his
law-escaping surrender to Vesper is masochistic in the opposite way of opting out of that social structure which does not necessarily guard him (Johnson 2010). He loves her enough to quit his precarious job and social subjectivity when saying, “I have no armor left. You’ve stripped it from me. Whatever is left of me, whatever I am, I’m yours.” Of course, after her death, all this self-skeptical deviation turns back into the reconfirmation of his name as “Bond, James Bond,” but this reaffirmation itself draws delicate attention.

**Skyfall, The Self-Reaffirmation of the “Dark Knight”**

Now let us return to *Skyfall*. Ironically, it is in this most successful Bond film that Bond undergoes the most existential crisis along with M and the entire MI6. The motif of falling suggested in the title is manifested at the beginning when Bond’s colleague Moneypenny (Naomie Harris) obeys M’s ruthless order to shoot from long range Patrice, a villain fighting with Bond on the roof of a train, but instead Bond is hit and falls into the river below (Bond’s revenge is done later by making Patrice fall from a building). Accidentally abandoned by his agency, Bond is then presumed dead; M writes his obituary later. This symbolic death happens in a “teaser sequence,” which conventionally shows Bond’s climactic action and resolution of an undetailed mission before the opening credits with title music followed by the main narrative. Moreover, *Skyfall’s* title sequence does not titillate with the usual exhibition of girls, guns, and travels, but unfolds an experimental perspective of the camera falling into the abyss of expressionist, partly animated imagery as if it dug inside 007’s dying mind, ending up with a vertiginous zoom into Bond’s iris. The implication is his social abjection, cast off from subjectivity yet not dead like an object, thus stuck between life and death. After this prologue, Bond reappears as an aging, grudged alcoholic, spending a time of depravity in a tropical town, no longer as the hegemonic agent but as an abject whose loss of belongingness leads to physical and moral dilapidation. This period is brief as he soon returns to London upon the news of a terrorist attack on MI6, but his full re-subjectivation is completed only by the end of a whole new mission. Meanwhile, M’s weakened operational edge and moral authority confronts her with the pressure to retirement as well as the criticism of the entire agency for lacking democratic transparency and strategic capability. So, the film will be about the quasi-postmortem redemption of both the agent and agency.

Such identity crisis becomes all the bigger as globalization renders global systems and subjects increasingly precarious. The post-historical
systems of inclusion based on liberal democracy, multicultural commerce, and social networking inevitably generate symptoms of exclusion, the abject in various forms who are deprived of global citizenship, and whose revengeful return to the systems may be catastrophic. Also, due to the collapse of political barriers like the Iron Curtain that separated ideological oppositions, enemies are hard to detect, germinating in the systems as internally excluded byproducts. Criminal and financial forces mingle; schizophrenic terrorism and transnational neoliberalism mirror each other in their expansion. *Skyfall* updates this situation, staging the hacking of MI6’s global network by its former agent as cyberterrorist. The post-911 globalism is more complicated in the backdrop of the digital revolution. The World Wide Web is ubiquitous, and information flows omnidirectionally. Warfare is net-centric, and satellite cartography casts an inescapable web of global surveillance. The leaks of computer data and the loss of network control are riskier than any physical military action; the IT infrastructure of daily life offers a broad platform for hostile attacks; global networks of opportunities are those of threats. The more connection, the more contagion. Not the gun but the computer as weapon renders Bond’s physical action anachronistic, while the civilian overseers’ demand of clear accountability harshly questions the dysfunctional role of MI6.

Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem), the ex-agent terrorist connected to SPEC-TRE, is an up-to-date villain in this regard, a master computer hacker who steals and leaks MI6’s agent identities on YouTube. While hacktivists and whistleblowers such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden are even revered as freedom fighters for the public right to know the suspicious power mechanism, Silva, though evoking these digital heroes, is nothing but a public enemy doing a renegade activity (Smith 2016, 147–50). The conservative logic of stigmatizing displacement works here: civil protest is externalized as a national security threat, and the inner problems of the state apparatus are singularized into an individual’s abnormality. Silva appears like a sadistic monster when torturing Bond and killing Bond girl Sévérine; a psychopathic predator when caged in his turn; and an insane warmonger when flying to the last battlefield in a military helicopter playing loudly The Animals’ rock number “Boom Boom.” In short, he is a subject of jouissance who enjoys surplus pleasure beyond normalcy, obsessed with “a maniacal desire for revenge rather than any higher notions of transparency or democratic duty” (Smith 2016, 152).

This revenge results from Silva’s backstory: an MI6 agent in Hong Kong, he was caught for hacking China beyond his brief (another sign of excessiveness), then tortured by the Chinese as M gave him up and got six agents in return
upon Hong Kong's retrocession to China. That said, his hatred for M's complicity with the Chinese in torturing him appears as too traumatically twisted whereas it turns out that M made an inevitable decision, which is aligned with her justification of some “reasonable” cases of torture. Consequently, on the one hand, Silva's message to M (“Think of your sins”) signals the return of the repressed, the punishment by the “undead” abject who cannot die since “life clung to me like a disease” after the torture as symbolic death. He recalls the horrors committed for imperial interests and mocks Bond's patriotic loyalty to M. On the other hand, Silva's resentment only turns into the active nihilism of pure destruction without any alternative idea, ideal, or ideology. He is oriented to no future but the past, just as his island kingdom is nostalgically associated with a ruined empire—a counterpart to Bond's Scottish home. The cyber war entailing actual torture and terror characterizes the dystopian closed circuit of post-historical globalism and abjection.

The dilemma of Bond's body is intensified accordingly. To upgrade it as a human interface with an embedded positioning device and info-processing capabilities is crucial for countering new enemies. When Silva escapes capture into the London Underground in the disguise of a policeman—the visualization of his ghostliness as a hacker—Bond chases him with the live guide of the control tower mapping their changing routes. However, as Silva still causes a massive train accident recalling the 2005 London terror, such risks literally make Bond “bare life:” vulnerable, suffering, bloody and sweaty unlike earlier Bond incarnations, who fights without dirtying his suit. Now, he must survive with technical proficiency for intelligent tasks as well as the self-healing power for body recovery (pulling out heart-screwing pins), flexibly adapting to volatile situations which test his superhero-like status to be retained despite its disposability by and in the system. From the socio-economic standpoint, this new working condition of Bond reflects the nature of post-industrial late-capitalist labor. One is required to acquire technical skills for handling knowledge and information as immaterial assets that overwhelm physical assets in cognitive capitalism, along with corporeal tenacity, mapping ability, flexible mobility, and useful adaptability in a globally expanded workspace and limitless competitive market. Work is relational, communicative, boundless, continuous, when workers become easily hurt, casualized, fired, and dehumanized in an economic “war of all against all”—a new Hobbesian state of Nature in which the social safety net to protect precarious labor from aggressive capitalization disintegrates to the extent that social abjection is no longer exceptional but normalized.

Likewise, Bond is put in the war on terror during the state of emergency, which is now all the more normalized as aggressive terrorization is
omnipresent, even invisibly networked and internally generated. The Bond series indicates a historical shift in this regard. In the past, as described in Fleming’s *Moonraker* (1955), Bond would venture only two or three times a year, and was basically “an easy-going senior civil servant” who would enjoy a routine of “elastic office hours from around ten to six” with “evenings spent playing cards in the company of a few close friends” and “weekends playing golf for high stakes at one of the clubs near London” (Smith 2016, 153). That is, disciplined work and pleasurable leisure were separated in his normal life while risky missions were given only exceptionally. The state of exception in which he worked as a secret agent was, like the “dark knight,” hidden under the surface of his official life as “white knight” (mirroring Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight* trilogy [UK/USA, 2005-2012]). To the contrary, this distinction is blurred in Daniel Craig’s impersonation of Bond, whose status and environment are continuously unstable and modulable due to the infernal fusion of belongingness and abjection, loyalty and betrayal, peace and crisis, sovereign and terroristic agencies, and normal and bare lives. His world tour is no longer hedonistic but breathless with unpredictable widespread threats; the only sexual moment of taking a shower with Sévérine, who is soon to be killed, is very short. Even M is nothing but a replaceable boss; her desk is cleaned for a successor right after her death, which receives no official acknowledgment.

This precarious condition of life and work may underlie Bond’s bitterness over M and her would-be successor Mallory, the “bureaucrat.” Bond is no longer a loyal servant of the state with some rebellious attitude, but a twin of Silva, who tells that they are M’s two kids, two caged rats tested to survive from cannibalism. Their bifurcation into the opposite sides seems contingent, thus reversible—it suggests Bond as a seeming renegade antagonistic to the state. However, skepticism about the system also appears as the official interrogation of MI6 by civil servants and government ministers in parliamentary committees who stand for the very system more comprehensively and so require more democratic transparency, global efficiency, and neoliberal competitiveness in operation. For them, MI6 is a “bunch of antiquated bloody idiots fighting a war [they] don’t understand and can’t possibly win,” and M is responsible for the “monumental security breaches and dead operatives” (*Skyfall*). No longer a denied or obscured taboo, the agency is asked to be a collective “white knight,” publicly named and openly advertised on the web with official histories.

For M (Judi Dench), however, those civilians and non-combatant bureaucrats are too naïve since new enemies are no longer nations but unknown individuals without a face, uniform, or flag. M says in *Skyfall*, “Our world is not
more transparent now. It’s more opaque. It’s in the shadows. That’s where we must do battle. So, before you declare us irrelevant, ask yourselves, how safe do you feel?” This logic renews the Cold War rhetoric of fearmongering politics in the post-historical (and post-911) age in which global networks generate the schizophrenic multitude of stateless hackers and ghostlike terrorists. In this world which itself lacks transparency, secret agencies would become more vulnerable and ineffective under open scrutiny and public interference. M thus advocates for the secrecy of MI6 with “dark knight” elite agents as inevitable and even invaluable in the global fight against dark enemies. The terms of criticism are then inverted; it is not the citizen or politician but the agency that is “the true defender of democracy” against ubiquitous threats (Smith 2016, 156). The agency is not oppositional to, but rather protective of the open democratic system from behind. It works like a hidden underlying principle of the system, like the dark Real of the symbolic order. The transparent efficacy of legitimate reality does not function without this bloody invisible hand for dirty yet necessary businesses. The ideological effect is the conservative perpetuation of suprareal sovereignty that enables the justified perpetration of panoptic surveillance, unrestrained violence, and state-sponsored crimes. Now MI6’s headquarters are moved to one of Churchill’s war bunkers, and there, M quotes a verse from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses” (1842): “One equal temper of heroic hearts/ Made weak by time and fate but strong in will/ To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Bond’s excursion with M in an old car (the canonical Aston Martin from Goldfinger [UK: Guy Hamilton, 1964]) to his family estate of Skyfall, following Silva’s brutal attack on M’s inquiry hearing, is no other than Ulysses’ homecoming, a journey to reclaim their identity with “heroic hearts” as well as the identity of the spy genre. The itinerary from London to the Scottish Highlands, recalling Alfred Hitchcock’s The 39 Steps (UK: Alfred Hitchcock, 1935), suggests a nostalgic return to the origin and heyday of the spy thriller in the way of escaping from the tech-web of digital networks and surveillance apparatuses. Skyfall is in the middle of nowhere, of nearly sublime Scottish nature. It is a dark old place for traditional physical actions of bare lives. Bond uses conventional firearms with no computer; he fights, hurts, and “falls into water” (again) to almost die before finally killing Silva with a knife. Only after this experience of going down to the bottom of life does he resurge and reconfirm himself. The entire sequence indeed indicates Bond’s self-recovery. It is told that he was orphaned very young—his parents’ tombstone shows their names, Andrew and Monica Delacroix Bond—and now M and Kincade, estate gamekeeper, symbolically take the place of his parents. This quasi-family triangle forms a minimal unit of agency temporarily
bonded for the mission of action, grounding Bond’s pseudo-Oedipal quest to protect the matriarchal M from Silva. But the death of both Silva and M, for whom he mourns in a chapel, alludes to Bond’s final overcoming of his revisited past. In fact, he expresses his hatred of his childhood, and Skyfall is destroyed while he escapes the explosion through a tunnel. Like these repetitions of falling and escaping, Bond lives his past again as if to work through the trauma of orphanage which led him to MI6, whose recruiting target was “maladjusted young men who give little thought to sacrificing others in order to protect Queen and country” \((Casino Royale, film version)\). In other words, this past in which he became an adult as an agent is re-lived in order to reaffirm the sublimation from the lost primary identification with his concrete family to the higher secondary identification with the abstract nation. It is the classical double step of identity formation.

Back in London, the iconic rooftop scene of Bond contemplating the skyline dominated by Union Jacks repositions him as an adult son of the Queen and a loyal servant of the country. By extension, he is a heroic guardian of its imperial nostalgias; the locations of Shanghai, Macau, and some islands evoke the sunset-less Empire and its loss of colonies like Hong Kong. J.M.W. Turner’s painting \textit{The Fighting Temeraire} (1839), on display in the National Gallery where Bond meets Q, shows a gunship that led the Trafalgar victory, being tugged to her last berth to be broken up upon the British navy’s transition from sail to steam. Silva hits the spot: “England. The Empire. MI6. You’re living in a ruin. It’s over. Finished. What are you doing clinging to this notion of nation?” The recovery of MI6, therefore, operates as a reassuring fantasy of the national Empire’s postmortem resurrection as a global empire in which London is (again) the center, maintaining the imperial legacy—Bond’s victory over Silva valorizes traditional physical and mental strength over postmodern techy smartness. However, this fantasy is not smoothly sutured. The problem is not simply that the nostalgia of shadowy anti-terrorism may involve “the use of unaccountable and extreme violence in our battles with cyberterrorists” \((Hasian Jr. 2014, 585)\). More profoundly, the new global empire is like the Empire without emperor in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000)’s terms, full of post-historical symptoms related to cognitive capitalism and precarious labor, already cyber-networked and ready to abject its own agents. Bond’s coolness barely hides insecurity and terror, and his harsh actions infinitely inscribe fatigue and pain on his body. The agency’s self-reclaim of its \textit{raison d’être} is the desperate attempt to find an ideological frame in which what is lost is self-illusively retrieved. Bond’s traumatic past is called for back here, not to be affirmed in itself so much as to reaffirm his present identity in crisis. Abject subjectivity regains agential sovereignty in this way.
In *Spectre*, Sam Mendes again stages the UK’s political hazard and physical insecurity in central London and on British soil where the state appears as a significant threat to itself. But again, it is noteworthy to read global symptoms in the national framework as the title explicitly designates SPECTRE. Bond is networked into a collective working unit as never before, while his and MI6’s relevance to the new world order is critiqued again within the government—hence, Bond’s realization that “the best way to protect the country is to protect oneself from the country’s government.” Leading the sinister global SPECTRE, Ernst Stavro Blofeld (Christoph Waltz) taunts about Bond’s one-person show, telling him like Silva: “Everything you stood for... is a ruin.” His torture, using computer-controlled micro-drills to penetrate Bond’s skull, looks almost like a psychotic play for sadistic jouissance, again evoking Silva. Facing this bodily pain as bare life in abjection, Bond performs his mission against SPECTRE as his self-imposed mission of identity reaffirmation too. The doubly Proustian name of Madeleine Swann, his love interest, suggests that the Craig films are “ostentatious and extended *Remembrance of Things Past*”: *Skyfall* goes back to the time “before Bond” and *Casino Royale* to the time of “becoming Bond” (Murray 2016, 6). The ironic opening intertitle, “The Dead Are Alive,” is then not only about SPECTRE but also about Bond himself. The Self finds himself through the encounter with the Other, while both are floating around the world like undead phantoms of the past and intermingled shadows of the present. Of course, the film ends up with the neat separation between them and the Self’s triumphant elimination of the Other. This separation is reaffirmed every time the franchise struggles to reposition itself.

**Abject Agency from Bond to Bourne**

At this point, Bond’s self-reaffirmation can be seen as the series’ survival strategy in the contemporary context of the action spy genre and the global film market. The new millennial reflections of post-911 espionage, surveillance, security and precarity have blossomed in the Jason Bourne (2002-Present) and *Mission: Impossible* (1996-Present) franchises, political thrillers such as *Syriana* (USA: Stephen Gaghan, 2005) and *Rendition* (USA: Gavin Hood, 2007), and high-budget TV serials including *24* (USA: Joel Surnow, 2001-2014), *The Wire* (USA: David Simon, 2002-2008), *Spooks* (UK: David Wolstencroft, 2002-2011), and *Homeland* (USA: Howard Gordon, 2011). For example, *Ghost Protocol* (USA: Brad Bird, 2011), the most successful *Mission: Impossible* film, maximizes the crisis of secret agencies during the post-Cold War
disintegration of the distinction between friends and foes, the Self and the Other. In the Fox television series 24, a counterterrorism agent must cope with an enemy’s ticking-time-bomb-scenario as well as inner critics’ disapproval of his ruthless methods. Typically, global agents undergo the symbolic death of abjection, then restore or transform their suspended subjectivity before probable biological death by carrying out a traumatically (self-)imposed mission. It is often fulfilled through a double cognitive-corporal mapping under lethal threat: the temporal reconstruction of their pathological mind/memory and the spatial reorientation of a disastrous and apocalyptic territory. In this narrative bracketed by double death, global abject-subjectivity emerges as both reflecting and performing cognitive capitalism as well as its catastrophic imagination. However, the forking point appears here. Although the Bond series reboot to reflect the socio-physical vulnerability of agency beyond its old fantastical luxurious escapism, Bond is sutured back into the system as a sovereign agent like the Dark Knight. By contrast, Jason Bourne, among others, becomes a new type of terroristic agent who refuses this reterritorialization of old subjectivity and leaves open the gap between the global system and its inherent inconsistency.¹

Undoubtedly, “Jason Bourne” intends to reconfigure “James Bond” in a continuous sage up to the latest segment titled just Jason Bourne (USA/China: Paul Greengrass, 2016). The only enemy of the CIA is its own ex-agent Bourne (Matt Damon), who thus fights with his former agency. However, unlike Silva’s pure revenge or SPECTRE’s terror for capital and power, Bourne becomes a terroristic agent only to discover who he is and why the agency threatens him. The beginning marks his failure in a mission of assassination, after which he is shot and presumably turns amnesiac. The rest of the film chronicles his nomadic struggle to recover his memory, under attack from unknown assassins, whom he defeats while discovering secret CIA operations that involve and target him. As in the Bond series, the beginning is the end of the hero’s normal life, his symbolic death as traumatic abjection from his psychological, sociopolitical subjectivity. His quasi-dead body floating in the sea visualizes a rootless bare life deprived of identity in Agamben’s sense of homo sacer, whose murder by sovereign CIA agents is to be done in the state of exception with no due regard to any legal system.

Indeed, the CIA functions as a supralegal global network agency. The US headquarters connect to international branches; local agents carry out

¹ Elsewhere (Jeong 2019), I have compared James Bond to Jason Bourne to discuss sovereignty and abjection as reflected in Source Code (USA/Canada/France: Duncan Jones, 2011), among other post-Jason Bourne action thrillers.
remotely delivered missions in global metropolises. Using private planes and satellite surveillance, they intervene in the entire world under the Geographic Information System. Moreover, information is corruptly capitalized and traded by senior CIA officials with Russian magnates in the global black market of private greed. This dirty business implies “disaster capitalism” on the level of power elites who monopolize the control over security and industry, taking benefits from real or potential crises. They are enemies within who suppress uncomfortable truths and engineer illicit execution for “our” security at the cost of bare lives, including their own ex-agents who might debunk the system. That is why Bourne is trained and then threatened by them, treated like a potential terrorist, “a known unknown,” as Donald Rumsfeld posited, in the sense that we know we don’t know his location, which is a security risk. The CIA is a global ideological apparatus of neoliberal information capitalism and neoconservative patriotic vigilantism.

Bourne is defined in this system as “government property,” but also as “a malfunctioning $30 million weapon,” and therefore “a total goddamn catastrophe.” He is a corporeal program that merits high investment by removing threats from the info-market, but he would otherwise turn into the system’s own disaster. Bourne is therefore both a product and byproduct of the global system, embodying its cognitive capitalism and precarious labor, terror and war on terror at once. His pistol, money, and multiple passports symbolize his physical, financial, and intellectual qualifications for working like a global freelancer. He is an all-around professional with neoliberal abilities for success: quick decision, swift movement, high intelligence, and risk-taking. His cognition perfectly maps new places at first sight, while a traumatic sense of déjà vu brings him some lost memory. His action is fast enough for flexible adjustment to unstable situations, particularly during acrobatic chases. This competitive worker, however, suffers from endless labor without leisure, and from constant insecurity without protection in a perpetual state of emergency. Far from Bond’s bourgeois bohemian lifestyle, Bourne enjoys no consumerist relaxation, no exotic tourism, no hedonistic liberation. His only sexual partner becomes his romantic girlfriend, who is subsequently killed. All this precarity, worse than in Skyfall, characterizes Bourne’s body which is shot, drifting, strangled, wounded, and stabbed. However, this bare life equips itself with the endurable agency, the causative force to act for a mission, the self-imposed task of self-rediscovery through his continual self-recovery.

The Bourne series indeed combines James Bond’s efficiency with Noam Chomsky’s politics, renewing the 1970s paranoid thriller—such as The Conversation (USA: Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) and The Parallax View (USA:
Alan J. Pakula, 1974)—that reflected cynically on the US government and articulated conspiracy theories about the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. The Iraq War and the war on terror provoke a new paranoiac view in which our corrupt elites might create terrorists who could be internalized more dangerously. The sovereign system intensifies global surveillance and supralegal violence while violating democratic procedures, wreaking havoc on civilians, and convoluting terror and counterterror. Suggestive are Bourne’s chases, as well as Bond’s, in what Marc Augé (2009) calls “non-places,” spaces of transition without identities like a motorway and a supermarket. The Waterloo Station scene in The Bourne Ultimatum (USA/Germany/France/Spain: Paul Greengrass, 2007) particularly shows how a public place becomes claustrophobic under surveillance when cameras lurk everywhere to locate Bourne, but also how both the CIA and Bourne use their remotely controlled agents—for Bourne, a journalist as proxy—to play a hide-and-seek role-playing game with each other between the visible and the invisible. The hidden cameras maximize the visual field in which Bourne remains a mobile blind spot, a phasmid-like ghostly shadow—a terrorist by nature. The tension between the system and the terrorist then turns mutual fear into “dread,” the ubiquitous fear for unpredictable attack immanent in daily life. Normalcy is an emergency.

Each Bourne film comprises such discrete sequences as if they were levels in a video game that the player completes with increasing difficulty while exploring unknown non-places. This double game-narrative of “leveling-up” and “navigation” also applies to the entire series. Also, as secret files play the role of a plot developing archive, all physical actions are driven by the cognitive desire for valuable information. Bourne’s body functions here as a sensorimotor system, with the self-backup function embodying a certain undeadness, while his mind is a self-investigating cerebral system that restores damaged memory for identity rebooting. The film series thus appears as a “mind-game” (Elsaesser 2009) road movie in which a traumatized abject-agent has to follow an undetermined itinerary along contingent spatiotemporal shifts in both fractured memory and disoriented movement. It unfolds a cognitive-corporeal mapping of horizontal global space and vertical subjective time; a struggle of today’s pathological subjectivity as abject to orient itself in the threatening world. The terrorist becoming-agent of the abject is then a survival strategy against the global system by reappropriating qualities and skills that are required and trained within the very system—as already noted, this aspect is shared with Daniel Craig’s Bond films and harkens back to Licence to Kill (UK/Mexico/USA: John Glen, 1989) as well.
The origin of this antagonism is, however, not merely the corruption of the system. Bourne fails in the initial mission because of his hesitation about killing an African leader in the presence of his children; Bourne takes revenge for the murder of his girlfriend who was shot instead of him; Bourne apologizes to the daughter of a Russian reformist politician he killed, after discovering the grubby operation and business of his boss who ordered this murder; Bourne always uses violence in a restrained manner, protecting and never really killing others except for the case above. All these suggest Bourne’s guilt and responsibility for (possibly) killing (decent) people, his atonement and redemption through paying off this guilt as debt. In *The Bourne Ultimatum*, he finally reaches the CIA training center in New York where, he remembers, he was forced to kill a masked terror suspect as an initiation ritual into a secret team; killing a bare life in the state of exception gained him supralegal sovereignty. The ultimate scene of self-discovery recalls the original sin of killing the Other, whose face was covered to prevent the Levinasian encounter with the “face of the Other” that commands, “You shall not kill,” in its absolute vulnerability, which may conversely reveal the potential sanctity of life. At last, the post-traumatic restoration of his identity, its ontological and epistemological recovery, ends up with the traumatic revisit to its initial formation, as in *Skyfall* and *Casino Royale*. But upon knowing the truth of who he was, Bourne, unlike Bond, decides to abandon this identity, the license to kill, the system of mechanizing sovereignty and abjection. He is then shot and falls into New York’s East River. Real death? We see him swimming away.

It is clear where Bond and Bourne meet and part. Secret agencies as a protective gear of global systems driven by info-capitalist tech-networking inevitably generate symptoms of precarious labor and bare life, and agents as competitive professionals, once excluded, can turn into dangerous hackers or whistleblowers. Bond, particularly in *Skyfall*, undergoes abjection too (evoking *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* [UK: Peter Hunt, 1969], *For Your Eyes Only* [UK: John Glen, 1981], and especially *Licence to Kill*), but fights against such terrorist abject-agents by reaffirming the sovereign agency of supralegal power repeatedly. On the contrary, while Bourne’s former network agency is more globalized and corrupted at once, his traumatic abjection puts him under harsher conditions of bare life in a radically normalized emergency with no room for the hedonistic privileges of the early Bonds. His cognitive-corporeal struggle with a lost memory and threatening space nonetheless unfolds as a convoluted journey for self-discovery in the form of terrorist resistance to the unethical system that trained him. In sum, the continuation of the Bond and Bourne series, in
opposing ways, tells us that the sovereign system and the abject agent are inseparable and that their antagonistic hide-and-seek network has no outside. This cinematic logic allegorizes the impossibility of one’s ultimate release from the global system, leaving only the fantasy of choice: Bond or Bourne? A blue pill or a red pill?

Works Cited


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