

Policy Galore: How The Films Of James Bond Tells The World What Issues Really Matter

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Abstract

- ❖ The James Bond films are icons of style and adventure. The films' perfectly-tailored suits, gourmet food, and sleek automobiles have always reflected the evolving benchmarks of Western style. In the same way, the Bond films can act as a measure of the evolving set of dominant western political issues, from the Cold War to space weaponry, from the drug trade to blood diamonds. We do not view the Bond films as setting the patterns for global issues. Rather, we assert they engage issues that have reached a critical mass in Western political consciousness. Always cutting edge, the Bond films have never shied away from the salient, even trendy, issues of their time. Thus, the Bond films function as a lagging indicator; once an issue reaches the status of a James Bond film plot, it has received enough public attention to warrant serious discussion. In this paper, we examine the James Bond series and connect the plot lines to the issues that dominated the contemporaneous political debate. We also examine how the Bond films make use of transnational sovereignty-free actors to allow the scripts to move in directions that would be unusable or unwieldy if tried with traditional state-based actors.

Introduction

- ❖ After hauling in more than five billion dollars in worldwide box office receipts, it is safe to say that James Bond films have achieved an iconic status in the cinema world. Bond films have spawned fashion trends, turned unknown actors into international superstars, and have been copied and parodied literally hundreds of times. While the status of the Bond franchise as cultural touchstone is not in dispute, what is less commonly recognized is that the Bond films have historically reflected the changing international political landscape. From *Dr. No* to *Quantum of Solace*, the films based on Ian Fleming's master spy have managed to alternately track and lead public opinion on a variety of important global issues. In this paper, we examine the ways in which the landscape of the Bond universe has changed in terms of plots and characters, and discuss how those changes coincide with changes in public opinion.



<http://www.filmofilia.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/craig.jpg>



<http://www.autographshow.com/jaws2.jpg>

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Methods

- ❖ For our purposes, we opted to assess the policy elements of the Bond films in two ways. The first is to examine the importance of the transnational sovereignty-free forces in the plot construction. The second is to examine the efforts of the scriptwriters to incorporate major political issues of the time into the plot elements.



<http://www.bondmovies.com/stills/frw1.jpg>

Results

- ❖ James Bond rarely has direct conflict with the intelligence agencies of other nation-states. In fact, there is only one film – *For Your Eyes Only* – in which Bond is in direct conflict with the legitimately authorized intelligence forces of another nation, those of the USSR.
- ❖ Post-SPECTRE, Bond dealt with two types of villains: extremely wealthy individuals with a desire to control world events (*Goldfinger*) and large crime organizations, including drug dealers (*Live And Let Die* & *License To Kill*), international arms dealers (*The Living Daylights* and *Casino Royale*), and international smugglers (*Octopussy*).
- ❖ 1960s: The plots of *Dr. No* and *You Only Live Twice* focus on efforts of SPECTRE to interfere in the space race. *From Russia With Love* is a straight-up race for control of cipher technology, and *Goldfinger*, *Thunderball* and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* utilize the threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into the wrong hands to move the plot forward.
- ❖ 1970s: By 1972, Gallup surveys show respondents listing drugs and gang crime as the most important issues to be nearly equal to those listing Vietnam. This was a 10-fold increase in the crime fear rate since 1965, and the Bond writers capitalized on it with the release of *Live And Let Die*, which focused on the power of drug rings in the United States.
- ❖ 1980s: The only Bond film with explicit competition between NATO and legitimate representatives of the USSR, *You Only Live Twice* appeared. The mid-1980s also gave us *Octopussy*, the only Bond film where nuclear disarmament is used as a major plot element. The remaining three Bond films of the decade are more closely associated with relevant news items. *A View To A Kill* combines the technological boom of Silicon Valley with fears regarding a major earthquake in California, *The Living Daylights* occurs in the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and *License To Kill* reflects the Nancy Reagan anti-drug message in its focus on the power of international drug cartels. It is worth noting, however, that nuclear disarmament is presented in a negative sense, being used as ruse to provide a pretense for a Soviet invasion of Western Europe.
- ❖ 1990s: The Bond films become reflective of the fears of the public with plots based on timely political issues. The power of media moguls to manipulate politics and policy (*Tomorrow Never Dies*) and control oil fields in the former Soviet Union (*The World Is Not Enough*) were harbingers of things to come. In what some may argue is the an example of trying-a-bit-too-hard-to-be-relevant-to-modern-geopolitical-fears, *Die Another Day* combines concerns regarding North Korea aggression with blood diamonds and global warming into a single film. During this period, all of these issues were prominent in Gallup polling in the two- to three-year stretch prior to the film's release.



http://www.filmindustry.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/07/james_bond_pierce_208750.jpg



http://www.scene-stealers.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/19_30_jespuck-thunderball-1965-seat-connercy.jpg

Conclusions

- ❖ The overall pattern of the Bond plots is clearly connected to a wide swath of major global issues. From the fear of losing the space race to the impact of drug smuggling and blood diamonds, the Bond films have sought to connect themselves to the global political consciousness. The use of transnational sovereignty-free actors combined with a finger on the pulse of public opinion gives the Bond films the leeway to explore avenues that might otherwise be too difficult or fantastical by using traditional state actors.
- ❖ All of this leads to several important, if unanswered, questions. Given the clear efforts to make Bond hyper-relevant to modern political questions, will that serve to shorten the half-life of the overall impact of the film? For example, focus on blood diamonds in *Die Another Day* may seem horribly dated in another 20 years, whereas many of the earlier Bond films have maintained their status – at least in part – due to the universality of their themes. Will we look back on these latest Bond films as dated and out of touch in the same vein as *The Man With The Golden Gun*, or will they maintain their universal appeal and give us deeper insight into the nature of those days? Only the passage of time will give us better answers.