License to kill or license to thrill? The *James Bond* movies and twentieth century propaganda films

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For almost half a century, MGM’s *James Bond* films have captured the hearts and imaginations of a global audience. However, as the series grew into one of Hollywood’s most successful franchises, the content of the movies themselves began to drift away from the gritty realism found in Ian Fleming’s novels of the 1950s. This study explores the reasons behind such a paradigm shift and reveals similarities between many of the 007 movies and propaganda films produced by the infamous authoritarian regimes of the 20th century. Famous early examples of propaganda cinema, such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, refined the art of moviemaking and demonstrated film’s ability to further the sociological ends of repressive governments. The Bond films represent a fascinating compromise that highlights the underlying exchange of cinematic techniques between the movie moguls in Hollywood, and the state-sponsored propaganda machines from both extremes of the political spectrum.

"The name’s Bond. James Bond” ranks among the most famous movie lines of all time, and yet despite Bond’s iconic status, it is difficult to imagine that Ian Fleming would have recognized the re-purposed, indestructible “super-spy” that appeared in many of the Bond films as the same character he created for his series of novels.

This paper will explore the relationship between certain iconic Hollywood movies produced since the advent of film in the 1920s and the propaganda films sponsored and screened by some of the most infamous autocratic governments of the twentieth century. To illustrate this link, it is necessary to first explore the origins of propaganda and the attraction of the moving image to its proponents. This essay will highlight the personalities behind the production of propaganda in both the elected and unelected governments of the pre- and post-World War II periods, and parallel their motives with the rise of the Hollywood studio’s “movie moguls,” many of whom had escaped from these repressive regimes. As the cultural political and sociological backdrop of American thoughts and fears evolved over time, so too did the US film industry, inflating the propaganda inherent in the James Bond franchise by pitting the hero against whatever political bogeyman captivated the American populace at the time.

What is propaganda and how is it used in film?

The idea of disinformation was originally discussed over two thousand years ago by the Indian political theorist Chanakya in his treatise, the *Arthashastra*. Chanakya wrote about the merits of “silent warfare,” in which astrologers “should fill [the king’s] side with enthusiasm by proclaiming his omniscience and association with divine agencies, and should fill the enemy’s side with terror.” Since then, propaganda has evolved rapidly in its form, but its function remains the same: to manipulate the thoughts of a group of people by spreading information and misinformation. In the past thousand years, as art grew rapidly in popularity and prominence, so did visualized propaganda: the invention of the printing press paved the way for a golden age of posters and pamphlets.

However, perhaps the most significant leap forward for propaganda came with the introduction of cinema into the mainstream at the beginning of the twentieth century. Movies tell a story in a way that posters and books simply cannot, and they are able to envelop the viewer in a world so completely that he can quickly lose all sense of self and become entirely attached to the character on the screen. Concealing the fact that the audience was being manipulated in this way was the key to a successful propaganda film: the moviegoers should identify with the hero on a personal level and naturally empathize with his or her plight.

The establishment of the studio system in 1930s America encouraged directors to create films for the purpose of building a loyal following to the studio as a whole. As each film served as only a single example of the studio’s larger offerings, directors used their films to showcase their directors, budget, and stars, just as the dictators used films to showcase themselves, their policies, and their armies. The stunning visuals and large scales of films such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* illustrate the tactics these directors used to attract loyal audiences. Even Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Reich Minister of Propaganda, envied “the appeal of the Hollywood model, of films designed to distract and entertain while at the same time offering a mass audience appealing images of heroism, leadership, and authority.”

One of the most important aspects of the propaganda films, typified by German films such as *Triumph of the Will* and Hollywood’s 1977 Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me*, was portraying the hero’s nation in an overly positive light. The Nazi propaganda masterpiece *Triumph of the Will* depicts the Third Reich as a powerful, near-utopian society, juxtaposing towering lines of soldiers with perfect Aryan families and crowds of flag-waving admirers, leaving the audience no doubt about the strength and unity of the German nation.

*The Spy Who Loved Me*, while subtler in its approach, still displayed a calculated design by directors to inspire love for Britain. Its opening sequence shows Roger Moore’s Bond bedding a covert Russian spy, before he is chased on skis through the Austrian Alps by three assassins. After disposing of one of his pursuers, Bond mocks the others as he skis off a sheer ledge thousands of feet high and pulls the cord on his parachute, which opens to reveal a huge Union Jack flag in all its glory. This is in turn saluted by Carly Simon’s theme song for the movie, *Nobody Does It Better.* Since only a few of these elements came from Ian Fleming’s book, the movie showed a shift in focus toward greater patriotism – and stronger propaganda.
Propaganda and the James Bond franchise

The James Bond brand has become one of the most popular and enduring cultural phenomena of the past half-century. Ian Fleming’s twelve novels and two short stories spawned a multi-billion dollar movie franchise - one of the longest running in history - and provided some of the most memorable characters and quotes to ever appear on the silver screen. By continually adapting Ian Fleming’s novels into movies that touched on cultural concerns of the time, combined with the use of propagandistic tactics, the Bond franchise was able to capture the imagination of the West.

Having shopped their first 007 project, *Dr No*, around Hollywood studios and distributors for over a year, producers Albert “Cubby” Broccoli and Harry Saltzman finally raised the $1 million production budget from one of Hollywood’s oldest studios, United Artists (which was acquired by Louis Meyer and Sam Goldwyn’s MGM studios shortly thereafter). Although *Dr. No* achieved relatively impressive box office receipts, the team’s strategy for their second Bond film (based on Fleming’s fifth novel in the series) paved the way for the enormous popularity the franchise came to enjoy.

Escaping the persecution of Eastern Europe during the early twentieth century had left Meyer and Goldwyn with little sympathy for the Communist ideology of the Soviet Union. Similarly, in the 1950s, Americans had been bombarded with anti-Communist “Reds under the Bed” propaganda and the McCarthy hearings, which drove many prominent filmmakers out of Hollywood and fed the prevailing culture of paranoia.

The low point was reached during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the relationship between the USSR and the US was strained almost to breaking point. This meant that the 1963 release of *From Russia With Love* could not have come at a better time. The film demonstrated all the traits of a quintessential propaganda movie. Bond (played by Sean Connery) was the idealistic Cold War hero - a quietly charming, classically handsome English gentleman, whose self-assuredness and serious patriotism struck precisely the right chord with western audiences.

Connery’s Bond appealed to both men and women, while the Soviets appeared as ruthless but flawed enemies, under the guise of the counterintelligence agency known as SMERSH (an acronym of two Russian words loosely translated as “Death to Spies”), a representation of the KGB. In fact, the Soviets are depicted as so underhanded that they use the fairer sex to do their dirty work: either the beautiful Tatiana Romanova (played by Daniela Bianchi), or the sinister Rosa Klebb (Lotte Lenya). Klebb is an ex-SMERSH agent working for the evil SPECTRE organization that is intent on initiating a nuclear war between the USSR and Britain. The film remorselessly capitalizes on the anti-Soviet sentiment of the age and played a significant role in reinforcing the western media’s depiction of the “evil Communist empire” waiting to pounce on any weakness or division shown by the US or its allies.

Given the commercial motivation that was driving the Bond production team, it is hardly surprising that its writers and directors found it necessary to contemporize Bond’s on-screen persona, even if it meant a significant departure from the character portrayed by Ian Fleming in his novels. Fleming’s *007* is a rough-handed, ruthlessly tough ex-Navy Commander who appeals to the reader through his chauvinism and rugged charm. Broccoli’s Bond is a witty, debonair naval officer who uses his natural good looks and understated professionalism to seduce women and outwit his enemies. The film Bond plays it ruthless but fair, and never refrains from offering a sarcastic one-liner to his hapless foe as he delivers the final *coup de grâce*.

Ian Fleming wrote his novels in the early 1950’s, immediately after serving as a Commander in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (the very same rank and station as his fictional hero). While Fleming’s books present the reader with a relatively authentic world of espionage fashioned by the post-war austerity of the 1950’s, movie producers knew that updating and adapting the character and plots would bring the movies more commercial success. Since Fleming did not anticipate the ‘space race’ between the US and the Soviet Union during the 1960s, the novel *You Only Live Twice* makes no reference to space travel. However, the United Artists’ movie of the same name released in 1967 revolves around the devious plans of SPECTRE agent, Ernst Blofeld (one of actor Donald Pleasance’s most memorable roles) to “space-jack” one of America’s manned rockets. The subliminal message that Russians cannot be trusted to compete fairly tied in neatly with the consciousness of an increasingly media-dependent Western audience. At the same time, the film also included scores of Asian ninja-warriors who helped Bond overcome a common enemy. Once again, this twist to the Fleming original might be overlooked unless it is viewed in the context of the Vietnam War, which had by then become the main point of contention between the US, which was supporting the South Vietnamese, and the USSR, who supported the communists in the north.

Later Bond films featured other departures from the central themes of Ian Fleming’s novels, through which the producers sought to introduce their own commentary on the issues of the day. These additions included the increased trafficking of narcotics (*Live and Let Die*), and the risks of a powerful media giant controlling newspapers, television and online content (Elliot Carver (Jonathan Pryce) as a thinly disguised Rupert Murdoch in *Tomorrow Never Dies*). Broccoli and his Hollywood partners never missed an opportunity to capitalize on or shape public opinion, using Bond to deliver the message in both a compelling and entertaining way.

Following the end of the Cold War, the Bond franchise had to adapt to find a new cultural bogeyman in order to remain relevant. Sure enough, they found it in 1993 when a small group of extremists executed the first large-scale terrorist attack on American soil by attempting to detonate a bomb in the World Trade Center. The explosion failed to bring down the building, but caused six casualties and hundreds of injuries. Soon terrorism, not previously considered an everyday issue in the West, burst into the public consciousness. Terms like “jihad” and “suicide bomber” found their way first into common parlance and then into James Bond films.

The 1999 film *The World is Not Enough* opens with the detonation of a suitcase bomb inside MI6 headquarters. Bond pursues the bomber across the River Thames during a lengthy boat chase, and the two find themselves stranded in a helium balloon floating above the Millennium Dome in the heart of London. Once again, patriotism was the order of the day, and Bond’s intervention and eventual defeat of the terrorists echoed the defiance that would later become a feature of public opinion in the days that followed 9/11.
Conclusion
So where does that leave James Bond in his role as one of cinema’s most iconic and enduring heroes of the past fifty years? Perhaps Ian Fleming anticipated the way his character could be twisted to suit different purposes – inside the story or outside. In an interview published after his death in December 1964, he said:

“I don’t think that he [James Bond] is necessarily a good guy or a bad guy. Who is? He’s got his vices and very few perceptible virtues except patriotism and courage, which are probably not virtues anyway [...] I quite agree that he’s not a person of much social attractiveness. But then, I didn’t intend for him to be a particularly likeable person. He’s a cipher, a blunt instrument in the hands of the government.”

In both his on-screen and off-screen personas, Bond is a ruthless secret agent, prepared (and licensed) to kill for the love of his country; his single-mindedness and almost super-human capabilities endow him with an air of invincibility. James Bond cannot be killed - and his timeless appeal has provided Hollywood with the perfect antidote against the spread of Communism, religious fundamentalism, and any other threat posed by the perceived enemies of the West.

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References
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