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THE BOND MYTH
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The Bond Myth

In my dissertation I examine how James Bond movies have been able to sustain their success and relevance for more than 50 years – how Agent 007 remains an important icon of pop culture to date.

Developing the Myth

One of the main underlying reasons for success is the remarkable initial achievement: if Bond had failed to become a world success and cultural reference point in the 1960s, it is likely that the movies wouldn't even have continued in the 70s. This is especially important as this initial success enabled building a persistent fan base that could support the production during occasional downturns. Indeed, Bond has become an icon, and as soon as the audience recognised this, they also understood that it would be present in their everyday lives regardless of their subjective and occasionally changing opinion on the matter.

Thus, one of the main questions is how agent 007 became a cultural icon. According to my research, presenting an entirely free hero without any obligations who could articulate and even manifest the desires of the audience in the 1960s played a key role. Bond's adventures were presented with explosive visual and sound effects, an attractive mixture of violence, erotica, wit and technological advancements which not only created an entirely new film genre, but also attracted previously unknown masses to the cinemas. Bond offered more than the cinematic experience: its relevance and modernity has had an elementary and long-lasting influence on the lives of the cinema-goers.

By the second half of the 1960s, the golden age of the series, the key pillars were identified at both the narrative and moral level: novelty has been formalised and thus has become repeatable. Narrative elements (such as the mini story before the main title, the scheduled appearance of Bond girls, M's specification of the task and Q's distribution of the gadgets) provided the audience with instant identification and feedback.

From the moral perspective, Agent 007 satisfied all moral criteria expected from heroes, while being at the same time modern and observant of traditions. He could be unfaithful to his short-term lovers while being loyal to his homeland. He used his license to kill, but rarely cheated and always considered the interests of mankind. He argued with his boss when he was right, but conformed to other social conventions. Thus, Bond became a hero for everyone's taste: to the rebel youth of the '60s as well as the viewers with a more conservative approach, afraid of the rapid changes.

Sustaining the Myth

Bond has never been as relevant as he was in the 1960s. The world kept changing constantly, but Bond could not change with it without losing himself in the process. From that point, the challenge was to sustain the popularity of the series. To achieve this, the authors had to gauge precisely when and how much 007 had to be renewed, but also what they should never change.

One of these unchanging aspects included the action movie experience: action scenes always have to be cutting-edge and breath-taking. The story must be full of twists, pursuits, clashes, and has to include some memorable, outstandingly directed and edited sequences that really tie to viewers to their chairs. Another most important feature of Bond films is globe-trotting: the viewers always join Bond in travelling to remote and exotic locations, and the remarkable headquarters of the villains have also been a main characteristic throughout the years. Thus regarding spectacle and action the audience very rarely felt disappointed.

An additional important feature is the morality of the hero and the series: the single most important difference between Bond and a (self-appointed) vigilante is the agreement in effect between him and the British secret service. He has the licence to kill, which was authorised directly by MI6 and indirectly by the citizens. We appoint Bond to fight for us, and therefore he is not culpable for violence which is often seen as the guarantee of efficiency. When this agreement is broken, Bond loses his essence: Such attempts by the series always faced a backlash from the audience. The key elements of Bond's moral code are protecting the weak, the importance of honour and justice, loyalty above all, and modest respect for tradition. Although the assessment of certain moral issues changes, key moral cornerstones remain unchanged. Only society's approach to these moral cornerstones changes: from time to time, some of these issues are elevated to the level of basic morality. As respectful condescension towards women has been replaced in social consciousness by emancipation, the creators of the Bond series also started to deal with trying to make the basically male chauvinist character more open-minded, or - if this proved unsuccessful - to either put his machismo in context or explain it with psychological reasons. This effort was also apparent with regard to homosexuality, much later: the sexual orientation of the main villain in *Skyfall* is not ridiculed or condemned by the series - contrary to previous depictions of earlier Bond films.

The third aspect (which is not carved in stone) concerned the genre of the movies. It is a basic feature of Bond films to mix elements of comedy, drama and action movies. It would be blasphemous to divert from this. However, by mixing the proportions of these components, the authors of these

movies could still achieve important changes in genre. Bond movies were always balancing between the genres of comedy and serious action movies. This almost constant change had a good impact on the series overall, as all potential viewers responsive to Bond were included in the audience. If 007 had been tied to a single genre, it could have served its returning viewers better - but would also have rejected the fans of other genres. This way, it had a wider angle, and even if some of the viewers left the cinemas unsatisfied, it still did not mean that they would not be returning: they could have still trusted that next time Bond would be more “authentic” and closer to their own taste.

Adjusting the genre of the films is obviously linked to the most important characteristic of the series: the effort to continuously stay relevant. One of the key novelties of the series in the 1960s was modernity - and this was not only achieved through implementing the most exciting technological innovations, nor by constantly alluding and reacting to the geopolitical situation and the Cold War, but also through introducing sometimes ground-breaking and sometimes merely thrilling and overwhelming cinematic expression. Indeed, visual storytelling improved a lot during the 1960s, and by the early 1970s, Bond was not pioneering the depiction of violence and sexuality, but started to seriously lag behind the competition. Since producers had decided not to risk the family-friendly rating, they had to accept this new reality. Meanwhile political thrillers started to have a much more complex and interesting approach to politics, as the age of Agent 007 being a pioneer of social mobility also passed. Simply put, by the end of the 1960s, the first great phase of the Bond Myth had ended, and Bond had to become relevant in new ways.

During the early 1970s, the filmmakers intended to sustain the feel of modernity through evoking and copying then-fashionable film genres, but soon realised that this path leads to draining the Bond Myth - so they returned to the unique and grandiose visuals of Bond films typical during the 1960s. In the early 1980s, as global political conflicts once again started to intensify due to the Soviet Union’s involvement in Afghanistan, the cinematographers saw the opportunity to try to politically reactivate agent 007. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, a new question arose: as Bond had always operated on the axis of the Cold War, was he still needed now that the conflict was over? In reply, the first Bond film of the 1990s renewed the world vision of the series by actually relativizing the changes in the world. By depicting the threat coming from former Soviet Republics and also reviving villains in the new era, the film states that nothing important has changed and the role of Bond is as important as it had been before. After 9/11, as the sense of threat increased in the public and sources of danger became unfamiliar, Bond had to renew in effect: his foes are no longer megalomaniac misfits seeking world-dominance, but businessmen and politicians. The world cannot be saved anymore, because it is organically corrupted: the realistic objective of the agency and Bond

can merely be to win minor fights. However, aiming for realism also has boundaries. Bond is unable to fight cybercrime authentically on his own: before letting him become a parody of his former self, the Bond films of the 2010s gave up chasing modernity for now and tried to lean on reusing classic Bond themes one again

Hence, the Bond series has been able to continuously renew its form of expression, genre, morality and political approach, but only to the extent that ensures that former fans are not alienated. The creators have reached their decisions partly instinctively and partly by analysing the successes achieved by changes and the relative failures at the box office, in those cases where the changes failed to connect with the audience. The commitment has so far been fruitful. Bond is just as well-performing in cinemas now as he was when he began.