The Bonds of Empire

(Post-)Imperial Negotiations in the 007 Film Series

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In the collective imagination of the British Empire and its afterlife, the enormously successful James Bond films have played a significant role since the start of the series in 1962.¹ Over half the world’s population has seen at least one Bond film, according to a recent estimate, and both the logo and the Bond signature tune are ubiquitous in global popular culture.² From the opening scene of the first film, which shows the local head of British secret intelligence playing cards in his colonial-style club in Jamaica, references to Britain’s imperial past have pervaded the series. Like the fictional works of the colonial period that Edward Said studied in his seminal Culture and Imperialism, the Bond films exhibit a “consistency of concern” with empire that regulates audience perception of the relationship between metropolitan Western spaces and the (former) colonies.³ This is the more remarkable as these films are products of the post-imperial period. By the time the first Bond film, Dr. No (1962), came into theatres, Jamaica had gained its independence, and a sense of belatedness would continue to pervade the series. As cultural texts, the Bond films are documents of im-

¹ This essay was completed before the appearance of Skyfall (2012), which seemed to break new ground on some of the aspects discussed in the following.
perial nostalgia. They reveal a continuing reluctance to abandon the certain-
ties of imperialist chauvinism and document Britain’s anxiety over its
changing status in the post-imperial world. Not surprisingly, the films have
been called “at best ideologically conservative, and at worst downright reac-
tionary” in their treatment of race.

While many critics, including those I cite in the following, have examined
individual films or specific aspects of the series with regard to imperialism,
no comprehensive survey of the series’ (post-)imperial negotiations has been
undertaken. Such an analysis, which my essay will aim to provide, reveals
considerable changes over the last fifty years. Starting with a close reading of
Dr. No, I will argue that these changes are best illustrated in the analytic cate-
gories of characterization, plot, and setting, which will provide the structure
for this essay. My survey of the transformations in these categories will iden-
tify three pivotal phases in the history of the film series:

- the mid-1960s, when the first Bond films appeared in close succession
  and an imperial worldview could still pass for a matter of course;
- the mid-1970s, when Roger Moore debuted in two films suffused with
  imperial stereotyping and post-imperial anxiety;
- the mid-2000s, when the transition from Pierce Brosnan to Daniel
  Craig resulted in the most fundamental overhaul of the series, including
  an open discussion of the global entanglements of economic neo-
imperialism that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have conceptual-
ized as ‘Empire’.

It should have become clear by now that I am using the term ‘post-
imperial’ in a temporal sense, to designate the period after the collapse of the
European colonial empires, rather than in the ideological sense of a new
mind-set transcending the imperial imagination. Another methodological

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4 For the importance of nostalgia for conceptualizations of empire and its aftermath
see, for instance, Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” Representations 26 (Spring
1989): 107–22; Dennis Walder, Postcolonial Nostalgias. Writing, Representation, and
Memory (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

5 James Chapman, Licence to Thrill: A Cultural History of the James Bond Films


7 For the latter meaning, see Said, Culture and Imperialism, 18; for the former, see
Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’”