The geopolitics of *James Bond* and its intertwinement with gender roles, with a closer study of *Skyfall*

'I am not "involved." My books are not "engaged." I have no message for suffering humanity…',[1] wrote Ian Fleming about his famous literary franchise of *James Bond*. The author tried to contest the idea of his works propagating a certain worldview and reflecting the political environment of the time, but scholars would argue with such statements. It can be said that *James Bond* as a literary and subsequent film franchise is laden with ideological implications. The expanse of the themes covered, and the longevity of the film series allow for an analysis of the social and political changes the Western world has undergone since 1962. Hence, this essay examines the *007* film franchise from broader geopolitical, geographic, and gender relations viewpoints. The connection between geopolitics and gender politics is analysed in the second part of the essay, using *Skyfall* (2012) as a case study. Additionally, the essay examines the competition between modernity and tradition presented in *Skyfall*, which is looked at in more detail in the accompanying video essay.

Spanning 60 years of on-screen presence, James Bond as a film character has become an intrinsic part of modern popular culture. Undying popularity of the world's most famous spy has resulted in the film series being the most successful on-screen franchise for over 50 years. Moreover, it is believed that 'at least a quarter of the world's population has seen at least one Bond film'.[2] This suggests that audiences outside of the Western world were subjected to a Westernised perception of the global politics, culture, and value systems which present a very particular set of ideologies, often differing from the ones prevalent in the rest of the world.

[1] Emily Temple, *Ian Fleming Explains How to Write a Thriller* (2019) <https://lithub.com/ian-fleming-explains-how-to-write-a-thriller/> [accessed 23 February 2022].
[2] Klaus Dodds, 'Screening Geopolitics: James Bond and the Early Cold War films (1962-1967)', *Geopolitics*, 10.2, 266-289, p. 270.

Since James Bond as both the character and the franchise are idolised in modern popular culture, one should be mindful of the subtextual messages they convey and the influence they can have on individuals and subsequent pop culture products.

There is the idea that popular culture is a distinct subject separated from the real world of politics, but one can argue that popular culture influences politics, while also being shaped by it.[3] Media and popular culture exercise geopolitical power through their portrayal of people, places, and events.[4] Therefore, constant exposure and routine consumption of media assets saturated with a one-point perspective and a limited set of ideologies, arguably, lead to the viewer assuming their nation's political stance, which may in actuality differ. With regards to the *James Bond* series, Klaus Dodds admits that '[a] routine consumption of *James Bond* films and other forms of popular culture which seemed preoccupied with Britain's victory over Germany in the 1940s, [led to an] easy [assumption] that Britain's role in the world was far larger and more influential than economic or military standing [implied]'.[5] Therefore, it can be argued that the franchise offered a specific portrayal of the United Kingdom and ensured that millions of people viewed the world through the gaze of West European and North American culture, politics, and economics.

On the political level, the cinematic chapters of *Bond* have echoed and followed shifts in real-world politics. As such, the films presented the themes of the Cold War (*From Russia with Love*, 1963),[6] the space race (*You Only Live Twice*, 1967),[7] nuclear confrontation (*Diamond Are Forever*, 1971),[8] drug trafficking (*Live and Let Die*, 1973),[9] the energy crisis (*The Man*

[3] Jeremy Black, 'The Geopolitics of James Bond', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19.2 (2004), 290-303, p. 302.
[4] Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.109.
[5] Ibid., p. 76.
[6] *From Russia with Love*, dir. by Terence Young (United Artists, 1962).
[7] *You Only Live Twice*, dir. by Lewis Gilbert (United Artists, 1967).
[8] *Diamonds Are Forever*, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1971).
[9] *Live and Let Die*, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1973).

with the Golden Gun, 1974),[10] and terrorism (*Die Another Day*, 2002),[11] among others. Throughout these espionage adventures, Bond has always remained a patriotic paragon ready to strive for Queen and Country.

Bond himself is a figure rich in material for analysis. Although the character may not have been created strictly for the purposes of conveying Anglo-centric ideologies, many critics agree that the series emits potent messages about Britain's standing in the world. Therefore, it can be said that Bond is a highly ideological figure that contests the notion of a weakening Britain. The character appeared at the time when the British Empire had just ceased to exist and Britain as a declining power has not yet acquired a role in the new world order. Instead, it found itself between two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union. Akin to Britain's uneasy alliance with the United States against the Communist Bloc in the real world, in fiction, Bond on most occasions sided with the United States and the CIA. Even though the latter often provided invaluable help and resources necessary for the success of the mission, the British spy flaunted more skills, brains, wits, and professionalism that the job's outcome relied upon.

Alternatively, sometimes Bond also allied with Soviet intelligence services when the greater good (from the West's perspective) was at stake. However, 007 always outsmarted his communist colleagues or convinced his female counterparts to defect, often through seduction (*From Russia with Love*; *The Spy Who Loved Me*, 1977; *The Living Daylights*, 1987; *GoldenEye*, 1995).[12] Moreover, the cinematic instalment *You Only Live Twice* depicts the UK representatives confronting the US services over the accusation that the Soviets interfered with an American space craft.[13] This, arguably, implies that the British services are capable of

[10] *The Man with the Golden Gun*, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1974).
[11] *Die Another Day*, dir. by Lee Tamahori (20th Century Fox, 2002).
[12] *From Russia with Love*; *The Spy Who Loved Me*, dir. by Lewis Gilbert (United Artists, 1977); *The Living Daylights*, dir. by John Glen (United International Pictures, 1987); *GoldenEye*, dir. by Martin Campbell (United International Pictures, 1995).
[13] *You Only Live Twice*.

mediating the conflict between bigger parties and are prone to the investigation in contrast to the American intelligence being unwisely reactive to the allegations. Such portrayals create an illusion that Britain, although smaller and inferior in terms of finance and resources is still a powerful nation able to outplay and dominate geopolitical giants.

From the perspective of culture and lifestyle, James Bond as a man also possesses an understandable appeal. He enjoys the luxuries of sports cars, best clubs and restaurants, most comfortable travel, and keeps company with the prettiest women. Furthermore, Bond easily navigates various social events and situations, regularly exploits his wits and broad knowledge of niche topics as well as more obviously visits outlandish locations that no ordinary man can easily get to. The vast geography of 007's travels can be considered one of the appeals of the film franchise. One can argue that the inclusion of remote less popular destinations as well as easily recognisable places allows the viewers to become tourists and experience otherwise unattainable locations vicariously through the films' characters (given that *James Bond's* audience forms from groups with various socio-economic backgrounds).

On the geopolitical level, when stripped of his lavish lifestyle and questionable charm, Bond appears to be a mere tool in the hands of the British government. Having said that, the spy's main tasks were not of an 'imperial policeman, thwarting insurrection in Malaya or Kenya',[14] but rather looking after 'Britain's physical, geopolitical, and resource security'.[15] As evidenced in the *007* series, travel takes up a significant amount of Bond's adventures with one narrative often taking the spy to multiple cities and countries if not continents. Given the frequency of Bond appearing in transit and the expanse of his geography, the franchise creates a highly dynamic world as well as a 'kinetic aesthetic: a glorification of the phenomenon of

[14] Black, p. 296.
[15] Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds, *Geographies, Genders and Geopolitics of James Bond* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2017), p. 199.

movement'.[16] The transnational travels of Bond and the ease with which he embarks upon them indicate his, so to speak, license to travel and the vastness of his fictional empire. This is only possible due to Britain's superiority and dominance in the fictional world of Bond where he acts as the direct representative of the British power. Moreover, Bond's family motto – 'The world is not enough'[17] – 'suggests a lack of satisfaction with the present condition and a desire to improve the current situation. It draws attention to Bond's drive to protect Queen and Country against threats from an ever-changing world'.[18] The empire, in this case, as created by Ian Fleming in his novels and maintained by filmmakers, does not necessarily comprise former British colonies, although these places frequently appear in the narratives, but rather involves locations of great geopolitical and strategic interests of the West.

The *007* franchise can also be looked at from the intermingling perspectives of gender and politics. With so much attention paid to 007's travel and the ideological significance of his espionage exploits, one should not assume that the locations featured in the *James Bond* series are merely passive backdrops. As mentioned previously, the locations that Bond travels to often bear strategic significance to Britain. Evidently, when away from his homeland, Bond embodies Britain, but he does so in a strictly patriarchal, heteronormative manner. At the same time, the countries the character travels to are represented by women.

Therefore, given the geopolitical implications of the film series, it is no coincidence that in the *007* films both the countries and the women appear to be wronged or to have misbehaved in a way that requires immediate British intervention. Both countries and women, then, often unable to stand up and resist the oppressor or a threat themselves, require Bond's involvement to be defended or corrected. This allegorically happens through Bond seducing and bedding

[16] Stijn Rejnders, *Places of the Imagination: Media, Tourism, Culture* (Routledge: Oxon, 2016), p. 56.
[17] *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, dir. by Peter Hunt (United Artists, 1969).
[18] Funnell and Dodds, p. 163.

respective women, usually manipulatively and non-consensually (*Goldfinger*, 1964; *Thunderball*, 1965)[19] and often several times per film. 'In other words, the Bond world is an exotic, feminine landscape that needs to be roamed through and investigated, with the ultimate goal of bringing it under (Western, patriarchal) control'.[20] Furthermore, Bond in his short-lived relationships with women is portrayed as the one receiving and also giving pleasure. Even when women (and countries) resist the British spy upon first engagement, eventually, they are seen satisfied and improved by the involvement. Thus, the character's promiscuity and with it, Britain's interference are framed as positive experiences for both parties.

It is true that each *007* film can serve as a sample for the analysis of race, gender, and geopolitics, among other themes, but in this essay, I suggest *Skyfall* as a case study for the geo- and gender politics of the franchise in the 21st Century. As the franchise approached the new millennium, its attention shifted toward Bond's homeland. The political and cultural landscapes of the new century brought about changes in both action geographies and the characteristics of Bond's adversaries.

Throughout most of the *Bond* films of the 20th Century, the antagonists were often quasi-stateless individuals with megalomaniac tendencies.[21] In more recent films, however, the adversaries were driven by capitalist gain or personal vendetta and often came from within Britain as defected MI6 agents or government officers (*Casino Royale*, 2006; *Quantum of Solace*, 2008; *Skyfall*)[22]. At the same time, throughout most of the 25 cinematic instalments, the role of Britain as a locale was restricted to a backdrop for Bond getting assignments from MI6 or his occasional short rendezvous with lovers. In turn, the 21st-century *Bond* films

[19] *Goldfinger*, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1964); *Thunderball*, dir. by Terence Young (United Artists, 1965).
[20] Rejnders, p. 60.
[21] David C. Earnest and James N. Rosenau, 'The Spy Who Loved Globalization', *Foreign Policy*, 120 (2000), 88-90.
[22] *Casino Royale*, dir. by Martin Campbell (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2006); *Quantum of Solace*, dir. by Marc Forster (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2008); *Skyfall*, dir. by Sam Mendes (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2012).

depicted Britain as a nation-state under threat with the home territory having more significance in the narratives.

Such changes are most evident in *Skyfall*, which marked *Bond's* 50th filmic anniversary. The story's antagonist is a former MI6 agent who, driven by personal revenge, executes a series of attacks on the secret service and London, the heart of the British nation. Some commentators argue that such shift toward the sense of homeland under attack or threat occurred post 9/11 and the theme has become prevalent in Hollywood action cinema.[23,24] Following the attack on the World Trade Center, the worry of domestic security has become dominant in both politics and blockbuster films. For British viewers particularly, *Skyfall* may be akin to an echo of 7 July 2005 which saw four near simultaneous attacks on the London transport system that resulted in the death of more than 50 people, including the four British-born suicide bombers.[25] 'This emphasis upon threats to Britain's national security can be seen as conservative reactions to global terrorism. […] ''terrorism'' is repeatedly referred to: M describes Le Chiffre as ''private banker to the world's terrorists'', and Bond's mission in *Skyfall* is (initially) to find a stolen list of NATO agents embedded in terrorist organisations'.[26]

Although conventionally to the *James Bond* franchise the narrative takes 007 to 'exotic' locations of Turkey and the Chinese regions of Macau and Shanghai, most of the action happens on British soil. Quintessentially, the final stand against the antagonist takes place in 'the back garden', figuratively – in Scotland, and literally – in Bond's ancestral nest. The relocation, arguably, implies the importance of Britain as a geography and a political power in defeating the malevolence both in its strategic foreign locations and home ground.

[23] Vincent M. Gaine, '''Not now that strength'': Embodiment and Globalisation in Post-9/11 James Bond', in *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, ed. by Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 127-146.
[24] Klaus Dodds, 'Shaking and Stirring James Bond: Age, Gender, and Resilience in Skyfall (2012)', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 42:3, 116-130.
[25] Dodds, 'Shaking and Stirring James Bond', p. 118.
[26] Gaine, p. 136.

Additionally, the familiar surroundings of the land lend 'Bond' more power and advantage, thus arguing that while Britain might lose its foreign outposts, it will certainly withstand and protect its home territories.

The changes in action geographies were also followed by the change in dynamics of Bond-M relationships. For over 30 years, M, the head of the Foreign Secret Intelligence service, was portrayed by male actors and with that, the relationship of Bond with his superior was subordinate and respectful. It is true that Bond frequently disobeyed direct orders and embarrassed the MI6 in the eyes of the superiors to the service, but he also desired the approval of his principal and had great respect for M. In turn, male M might have disapproved of Bond's personal and professional techniques, however, he also valued Bond's loyalty to the country and service as well as his ability to complete the mission and achieve the desired resolution.

By contrast, female M portrayed by Judi Dench marks significant changes in the representation of MI6, M's relationship with Bond, and Britain's geopolitical stance. As a woman takes up the role of M, MI6 undergoes significant changes. As such, the service moves to reside in more modern offices, however, the new M now holds full and personal responsibility for her department and her competency to do the job together with a general necessity of her branch gets questioned.[27] Moreover, the new M is pictured as a 'lone and lonely figure with few allies to aid […] her. American support, and even Chinese and Soviet/Russian assistance from earlier eras, is nowhere to be found'.[28] There is also noticeably more tension between M and 007, who seems to have problems with female authority. Having said that, the tensions in the Daniel Craig era (2006-2021) acquire mother-son connotations for M is now being framed as a maternal figure.

[27] *Skyfall*, dir. by Sam Mendes (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2012).
[28] Funnell and Dodds, p. 201.

Skyfall, again, presents the clearest depictions of such changes. The rivalry between Bond and the antagonist - Raoul Silva, a former MI6 agent - is portrayed as a sibling-like competition for the affection of a mother, with Silva frequently referring to M as 'mommy'. In the film, both Britain and M get attacked but they are not two separate entities anymore. Rather, the film establishes M as an embodiment of the state, and more literally Queen and Country. A clear parallel is shown when at one point in the film M is pictured wearing a crown (as a mockery) with the 'God Save The Queen' phrase written underneath and a Union Jack serving as a background. Likewise, both women are close in age and hold positions of power. Furthermore, *Skyfall* adds symbolism by frequently displaying the Union Jack close to M – her office table sports a figurine of an English bulldog with the iconic flag on its back, after the explosion at the MI6 office, its matriarch overlooks the coffins covered with Union Jacks, and after the M's funeral, as Bond reflectively surveys the cityscape, the flag proudly waves over the rooftops.[29] With these considerations in mind, an attack on M implies an attack on the whole nation and it is both M and the country that require being saved by Bond who, in turn, gets framed as a loyal and courageous English bulldog.[30]

The 23rd film, overall, also tracks the tension and competition between modernity and tradition. The professional suitability of modernity in the personification of the female M gets doubted by conservative male superiors. Old-fashioned Bond expresses concern over the competency of the new Q (Quartermaster, the head of the research and development division) due to his young age. Although in turn, modernity also contests traditionalism in form of Bond's colleagues and superiors suggesting Bond's resignation and retirement are overdue. This competition is particularly obvious when 007 meets the new Q, and the two men observe a painting of a grand old ship being hauled to the scrap yard (J. M. W. Turner's *The Fighting*

[29] *Skyfall*
[30] Funnell and Dodds, p. 211.

Temeraire). The scene draws direct visual and dialogic comparisons and juxtapositions between the old and the new, with Bond and Q representing an old warship and a swifter manoeuvrable hauler, respectively. The eventual death of the female M, however, signifies the inefficiency and flawed nature of modernity. Her death is a symbolic sacrifice that allows Bond and the MI6 to be reborn into familiar traditionalism and orthodoxy. Thus, after the death of M, the newly appointed M is a man, and his office regains the old-fashioned wood-panelled interior. Therefore, Bond is portrayed as an old dog learning a new trick, but it is his old-fashioned ways and methods that bring about success and restore the security of the nation.[31]

In conclusion, despite the statements of Ian Fleming on the 'involvement' of his stories about James Bond, the novels and their later screen adaptations imply various messages on gender roles, power relations, and geopolitics among other themes. James Bond himself is an interesting matter for a study as he lends a great opportunity to examine ideologies on race, gender, class, and power conveyed through his figure. Throughout 25 films of the franchise, 007 was always framed as a paragon of heteronormative masculinity, professionalism, and resourcefulness. Bond was always ahead of his foreign colleagues in terms of skill and wit, and it was always the British spy who ensured the successful resolution of the mission. The literary and cinematic franchises promoted the superiority of white middle-aged men over other races and genders through their narratives while providing entertainment for various ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups of audiences. At the same time, the geopolitical messages conveyed throughout the films implied that a smaller and less financially and resourcefully potent Britain was still a major political, economic, and cultural power equal to the one it was in times of the British Empire. The fictional empire, in this case, transcends former British colonies and includes places of strategic interest to the West. Additionally, the world of Bond

[31] Ibid.

requires frequent British intervention in transnational and local affairs to sustain the world order.

Ultimately, all films of the *007* franchise are an imperial power fantasy in which James Bond is a perfect embodiment of the traditional, patriarchal, and masculine power of Britain. It is true that each film of the franchise can be examined on various sets of ideologies, however, all cinematic instalments share the common message that suggests the necessity of actors such as Bond to ensure domestic security as well as best local and international interests of Great Britain.

Bibliography

Black, Jeremy, 'The Geopolitics of James Bond', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19.2 (2004), 290-303.

Dodds, Klaus, 'Screening Geopolitics: James Bond and the Early Cold War films (1962-1967)', *Geopolitics*, 10.2, 266-289.

Dodds, Klaus, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Dodds, Klaus, 'Shaking and Stirring James Bond: Age, Gender, and Resilience in Skyfall (2012)', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 42:3, 116-130.

Earnest, David C., and James N. Rosenau, 'The Spy Who Loved Globalization', *Foreign Policy*, 120 (2000), 88-90.

Funnell, Lisa and Klaus Dodds, *Geographies, Genders and Geopolitics of James Bond* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2017).

Gaine, Vincent M., '''Not now that strength'': Embodiment and Globalisation in Post-9/11 James Bond', in *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, ed. by Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

Rejnders, Stijn, *Places of the Imagination: Media, Tourism, Culture* (Routledge: Oxon, 2016).

Temple, Emily, *Ian Fleming Explains How to Write a Thriller* (2019) <https://lithub.com/ian-fleming-explains-how-to-write-a-thriller/> [accessed 23 February 2022].

Casino Royale, dir. by Martin Campbell (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2006).

Diamonds Are Forever, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1971).

Die Another Day, dir. by Lee Tamahori (20th Century Fox, 2002).

From Russia with Love, dir. by Terence Young (United Artists, 1962).

GoldenEye, dir. by Martin Campbell (United International Pictures, 1995).

Goldfinger, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1964).

Live and Let Die, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1973).

On Her Majesty's Secret Service, dir. by Peter Hunt (United Artists, 1969).

Quantum of Solace, dir. by Marc Forster (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2008).

Skyfall, dir. by Sam Mendes (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2012).

The Living Daylights, dir. by John Glen (United International Pictures, 1987).

The Man with the Golden Gun, dir. by Guy Hamilton (United Artists, 1974).

The Spy Who Loved Me, dir. by Lewis Gilbert (United Artists, 1977).

Thunderball, dir. by Terence Young (United Artists, 1965).

You Only Live Twice, dir. by Lewis Gilbert (United Artists, 1967).