



Ho Lin

Bonded for Life: Reflections on James Bond

*[This piece is the introduction to Ho Lin's new book *Bond Movies: A Retrospective*—a detailed, sometimes irreverent commentary on the James Bond movies. The book can be purchased in paperback and e-book formats on [Amazon](#). For more details on the book (as well as a special discount), visit [the author's website](#).]*

James Bond is dead... long live James Bond.

I wrote those words back in 1991 for my college newspaper arts weekly, leading off a feature article intended to be a tribute and requiem for the James Bond film series. Turns out I jumped the gun a bit—but I had reasons. At the time, British secret agent 007 appeared to be a spent force in the cinemas. United Artists, the studio behind the movies, was up for sale, the general public had taken to then-Bond actor Timothy Dalton like a snake takes to the mongoose, and any plans for a new installment in the long-running series had stalled.

Yet here we are, three decades later, and 007 continues to thrive at the box office. Compared to how things looked in 1991, any current issues plaguing the franchise seem like a mere hiccup. (At the time of this writing, the 25th entry in the official film series, *No Time to Die*, has withstood a change of directors and a worldwide pandemic that arch-villain Ernst Stavro Blofeld himself could have cooked up, with the release pushed back to 2021.)

So what accounts for Bond's continued success as a cinematic institution? How does the character persist in an era that is as far removed from his Cold War, sexually permissive sixties origins as you can get?

On a personal level, Bond has always appealed to the seven-year-old in me. That's how old I was when my parents dragged me to a theater in Montreal to see *The Spy Who Loved Me* in 1977 (against my wishes—I was tired and grouchy after a long road trip). Two hours later, we grabbed a post-movie snack at a local diner. The entire time we were there, my head full of the eye-popping stunts, locales, gadgets and heroics I had just witnessed, I annoyed the hell out of the other patrons by loudly humming the James Bond theme—over and over. In other words, life-changing influence, to the point where I foolishly avoided the Beatles for years, based on a single Sean Connery quip: “My dear, there are some things that just aren't done...such as drinking a Dom Perignon '53 above a temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit. That's almost as bad as listening to the Beatles without earmuffs.”

Clearly, the Bond movies are aspirational wish fulfillment of a sort. 007's original creator, Ian Fleming, vicariously lived his own fantasies of the adventurous life through the character. A World War II veteran who never quite had the thrilling exploits he reckoned he deserved, Fleming was married to a high-class socialite and burdened with the “soft life”—an existence plagued with hoity-toity friends and dinner parties. Bond was the opposite of the soft life: equipped with the author's snobbish tastes and unfulfilled appetites, he was both a hero and a slightly tragic figure, always destined to come out on top, but fated to never be completely satisfied or satiated. (“The world is not enough,” as his family coat of arms puts it.) The cinematic Bond has mostly ignored these shades of gray, and in the process became something more streamlined: an icon of cool. As Bond producer Albert “Cubby” Broccoli famously put it: “Men want to be him, and women want to be with him.” Nevertheless, the original heart of the character has remained beating, even in his most outrageous incarnations.

Bond movies also epitomize franchise filmmaking, for good and ill, but usually for the good: they offer simple pleasures well told, marrying British wit with Hollywood polish. Say the words “James Bond” to someone on the street, and rather than reflecting on Fleming's original novels and short stories concerning Her Majesty's most famously un-secret agent, they'll conjure up an image or theme tune from the movies. (No disrespect intended to Fleming's books, which have stood the test of time.)

Bond movies are straightforward heroic adventures at their core, with Bond an archetypal knight on a quest against evil. Like ancient legends, his adventures often carry a mythic charge to them. And like most knights, 007's armor has a bit of tarnish to it. He is cruel, hard, ruthless. But every so often his humanity peeks through the cracks of that hardened shell, while his epicurean tastes—only the finest women, wines, cars and accommodations for our man—supply a luxurious sheen to his adventures. What's better than living on the edge? Living on the edge with the best the world has to offer. As Fleming puts it in Bond's epitaph from one of his novels, stealing from Jack London: “I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.” That devil-may-care attitude towards danger (“Can we dance into the fire?” belts Simon LeBon in Duran Duran's theme tune for *A View to a Kill*) gives the character its edge, while the postcard exoticism of his adventures was tailor-made for the cinema.

Bond was a creature birthed during the Cold War, yet he's mostly existed outside of it. In Fleming's early books he often butted heads with the Commies, but soon enough he was

confronting larger-than-life megalomaniacs and apolitical criminal organizations. The films tend to relegate the Soviets to wary allies or sinister background noise—a decision that only adds to their timelessness. Nations rise and fall, allies and antagonists shift on a dime (the Afghan rebels who aid Bond in 1987’s *The Living Daylights* probably joined the Taliban later on), but the primary evildoers Bond encounters tend to be rich, powerful, nightmarish capitalists rather than demagogues—a knowing wink of irony for a film franchise that is nothing less than a moneymaking machine, albeit a very polished and entertaining one.

Like many figures of myth, Bond is specific in habits but general in character. He is both what he is, and beyond what he is. As he has been co-opted by the world, he has morphed within the eyes of his beholders, and as with things that belong to everyone, many disagree on what actually constitutes Bond. Some aspects are a given: tall, dark, handsome Englishman, license to kill, vodka martini, etcetera. But on reviewing the film series, it becomes clear how pliable the concept is. For those who enjoy camp or sniggering one-liners galore, look no further than the near-classic blaxploitation of *Live and Let Die*, or *Moonraker*’s not-so-classic “jump on the *Star Wars* bandwagon” moves. Straight spy thriller aficionados can treasure *From Russia with Love*. For epic locales, slackening plots, and jaw-dropping set-pieces, check out *You Only Live Twice* or *The Spy Who Loved Me*. For everything wrapped into one neat package, see *Goldfinger*. For a flawed masterpiece that deconstructs what Bond is about, even as it dutifully fulfills the formulaic requirements, watch *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*.

This pliability is the Bond series’ secret weapon. While other genre entertainments calcify within a few entries, 007 continually reinvents himself, welcoming disco with an insouciant wink, or acknowledging the end of the Cold War with a throwaway line. The gadgets stay forward-thinking and blissfully outrageous, the exotic locales give way to the latest global hot spots, and even the man himself is redefined with each actor who plays him.

Through these myriad transformations, the general structure of Bond films stays the same: the briefing by cantankerous ‘M’ (Bernard Lee and Judi Dench may seem worlds apart in their portrayals, but they both share a brusque affection for their Bonds), the gadget of the day provided courtesy of Q branch, a globe-threatening villain, hair-raising escapes or chases (by land, sea, or air—take your pick), a closing clinch with the heroine. But within that rubric, there’s plenty of room for stylistic change-ups and updates. The more successful Bond movies reflect the current Zeitgeist without kowtowing to it, paying tribute to past entries without turning to cheap homage. Thus, yesterday’s sinister terrorist organization becomes today’s venal media baron, to tomorrow’s renegade North Korean general. Like a jerry-rigged vehicle perpetually on the go, the Bond filmmakers have become adept at switching out parts on the run and injecting customization when needed. When something works (crazy stunt for the pre-title credit scene), keep it; when it doesn’t (shrieking damsels in distress—hello, Tanya Roberts), throw it out.

Film critic Richard Schickel notes that we appreciate the familiarity of these Noh-like (or should we say “Dr. No-like”?) affairs, because we appreciate the formula, and gain pleasure (or disappointment) from how it’s toyed with. At their best, the Bond films make you feel pleased with yourself as you glide down the tracks of smooth genre formality—and then they quicken

your heartbeat when they throw in a few roadblocks. The beauty of it is that one can pick a favorite Bond (movie, actor, whatever) like a favorite dish. Perhaps one's preference lies in the elegant yet brutal stylings of director Terence Young (don't fall prey to the common misperception that Bond movies are solely producer-driven—all of the directors have brought their stamp to bear on the legend, with wildly varying degrees of success). Or if fantastic vistas and clashing armies are your cup of tea, browse Lewis Gilbert's entries. Or if sprightly, meticulously shot action scenes are the ticket, savor some John Glen. And so on, and so forth.

Even though some may say Bond hasn't been culturally indispensable since the sixties, his influence is widespread. Back in his heyday, these were the event movies of their time (adjust some of those box office numbers for inflation), and introduced elements that have seeped into action filmmaking since: soundtracks based on rousing theme songs and stirring melodies (eternal thanks to John Barry), a zippier approach to film editing (courtesy of editor Peter Hunt), and an infatuation with the accoutrements of sophistication, whether it be on the technical side (where Tom Clancy, the TV series *24*, and their geeked-out intelligence brethren live), or simply living the illicit good life (caper movies and fleet-footed thrillers with deceit and misdirection as their virtues). Is Bond no longer relevant? Tell that to Peter Jackson, who notes that the prelude to *The Lord of the Rings* is based on the pre-title "teaser" structure of a Bond film, or when urbane playboy Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) gets flirty with his secretary—shades of Moneypenny, there—in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*, before popping down to the lab to snap up the latest gadgets from "Q"—er—I mean Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman). When talents as disparate as Spike Lee, Quentin Tarantino, and John F. Kennedy all cite their undying love for 007, it's clear that Bond still thrives, even if he isn't always the hot cultural trend.

Just as we teeter at the edge of familiarity and unpredictability with everything we encounter in life, we ride that edge with every new Bond film. Will it satisfy our expectations, and give us something new? As Bond soundtrack composer David Arnold points out, the first ten seconds of a Bond film are always the most anticipatory and exciting, because it is in those ten seconds that we are allowed to think: *This might be the best Bond film yet*. And even if the majority of the movies fail to deliver on that expectation, they draw us in deep enough to bring us back—whether it's the impossibly beautiful women who are gutsy enough to stand on their own but vulnerable enough to succumb to Bond's wiles, the kid-on-Christmas-morning glee of his gadgets, or the swinging, uncomplicated masculinity of Bond himself.

This book is not an exhaustive look at the making of the Bond films—a good place to start for that is Paul Duncan's *James Bond Archives*, or *James Bond: The Legacy* by John Cork and Bruce Scivally. Nor is it an academic analysis of the movies, packed with semiotics and gender theory and post-structuralist breakdowns (not that there's anything wrong with that, as Jerry Seinfeld would say). This is an affectionate tribute to the Bond films via my own critiques, taking into account the nuances of the Bond mythos, the noteworthy events in front of and behind the camera for each movie, as well as the cultural tides the films swam with and against, and the ways they amplify or deviate from the original Ian Fleming source material. I approach Bond using my own lens, and I freely expect that not everyone will share my views about what makes for a superior (or bad) Bond film. What I do hope is that this book will entertain, provoke

some thought, and maybe bring you to these movies with a fresh perspective, whether you're a long-time Bond devotee or a first-time watcher.

In our current age, evil can no longer be traced to a specific source, surveillance is omnipresent, and our own governments are being called into question. In such an atmosphere, one could argue that Bond, loyal to the crown, a stubborn independent operator in a world run by data, is antiquated and hopelessly out of touch—but the fact of the matter is, Bond has always been an escapist fantasy. As long as the escapism and the fantasy remain compelling, Bond will persist.

And persist it will, even as *No Time to Die* marks the end of Daniel Craig's tenure as James Bond, and yet another turning point for a series replete with them. As we motor off towards a new, uncertain horizon (and possibly another lengthy hiatus before the next 007 opus), it seems a fitting time to reflect on what's come before, and what might happen next. "Goodbye Mr. Bond," an arch enemy often smugly informs 007, only to find that the man, and the myth, remain very much alive. So in that spirit, I say, Hello Mr. Bond.

Ho Lin is the co-editor of Caveat Lector. He is a writer and musician who resides in San Francisco. His work has appeared in Foreword Reviews, The New York Journal of Books, Your Impossible Voice and The Adirondack Review. His books include China Girl and Other Stories and Bond Movies: A Retrospective.