

A Critique of the Bond film 'Casino Royale' in the Context of Sustainability

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The latest instalment in the series of James Bond movie adaptations, *Casino Royale* (2006), has also proved its most successful to date¹. The noticeable break from the traditional Bond norms has been universally welcomed by critics and public alike in every major market worldwide with the notable exception of the USA² where the more feeling and less mechanistic Bond appears to not be so welcome. The movie is strongly based on Ian Fleming's first Bond book of the same name published in 1953 which shows the rise of Bond to double-oh status, his betrayal by the beautiful Vesper Lynd and sets out the framework underpinning the Bond franchise.

Bond occupies a special place in Western cultural mythology. Rising after the ashes of the second World War, it depicted an exotic world in Technicolor long before cheap air travel, which reminded viewers of pre-war

Imperial material & cultural refinement. The images of sun-soaked former British Empire colonies with bikini-clad beautiful white women set against a backdrop of well-fed, cheerful, darker skinned natives is still in use



Figure 1: The incredibly beautiful Italian Caterina Murino

in the most recent release as can be seen in Figure 1. The traditional emphasis on powerful, fast cars with various life-saving or life-destroying technological gadgets also continues as can be seen in Figure 2. There also continues the frank direct admission that the Secret Service's secondary purpose after defending King & Country is defending corporate business – in *Casino Royale*, Bond wrecks an airport to save the destruction of the prototype of the world's largest airplane. Lastly,

¹ As of the 23rd February 2007, it is the 33rd highest grossing movie of all time and is far ahead of all other Bond movies. Note that box office receipts are not inflation adjusted – this is the comparative norm in the industry as it (very poorly) compensates for older movies having more time to earn revenue through video rentals etc. Source: IMDB.

² The movie came in top ten in all time rankings in India, China, Russia and Europe but has only managed 118th highest in the USA. Source: Variety Magazine.



Figure 2: Bond getting into the new Aston Martin DBS

there is of course the continuing litany of emotionally empty & convenient sex with incredibly beautiful women none of whom can resist Bond for long, with this edition's main Bond girl shown in Figure 3.

Invariably because Bond is Anglo-Saxon British, the women tend to be sultry European temptresses and even this still continues in the 2006 release as can be seen by the Bond girls being Italian and French (though not depicted as such in the movie).

In some ways, this Bond movie marks a return to basics – it is far more commensurate with the original books, far more introspective and is unusually self-critical for a Bond movie. It also returns to what the essence of Bond always was – a depiction of the superiority of the Western (specifically Anglo-Saxon) model over all others. The Bond movies very much depict beautiful people behaving violently in a mechanistic, cold, rational fashion whilst extravagantly consuming the best material society can provide in expensive yachts, cars and hotels. Little thought is ever given to emotional connection, spirituality or non-dominating forms of conflict resolution. It is therefore surprising that this Bond movie, being so reminiscent of a supposedly obsolete worldview in the modern trend of sustainable development, should be so popular especially outside the United States. How can our culture be moving towards sustainability when such movies are so popular with the 15-24 age demographic³?

Without developing a healthy emotional connection with women, no man can sustain a relationship for any length of time – this implies a disposable consumption of women which to its credit, the film's Vesper Lynd does point out. Fast cars imply fast driving which implies unnecessary risk taking i.e.; recklessness – the gaining of a short term high from the feeling of control of power by surrounding oneself



Figure 3: The also stunning French Eva Green

³ Cinema's traditional core demographic is the 15-24 category though it is expanding. Source: Pearl & Dean.

with a metal cage to dampen down the feelings of danger that the physical laws of Nature impose – again, to its credit the film does depict Bond getting horribly damaged through crashing his car (which to my knowledge is a Bond film first). The perceived freedom of having servants to perform one’s menial tasks so one has to occupy one’s excess time with gambling and yachts and Caribbean holiday homes still harks back to a Victorian mentality of society being strictly hierarchical, mechanistic and controlled from the top by an inherited nobility. Bond’s purpose in this movie is to stop terrorism disrupting the hierarchy but not by killing the baddie, but rather to force him to rejoin his masters through destroying his livelihood. In this one can see the oft-repeated forced coercion of other cultures into the Anglo-Saxon model through the deliberate destruction of their livelihoods. One also sees that the terrorists’ funding appears to mostly come from black African dictators, yet no attention is given to who was supplying the weapons these dictators clearly use in the film.

So, the success of this Bond movie would tend to suggest that our young still aspire to the glory days of the British Empire at its most dominating & exploitative with the surface gloss of all being well in the great machine – a highly unsustainable worldview, both environmentally and socially. Worse still, everyone apart from the Americans seems especially keen, particularly the former subjects of the British Empire, the Chinese and the Indians. What is going on?

I personally find its lack of success in the US to be indicative, and I shall explain why: there is a big difference between nostalgia and actual belief, and Bond was always about unrealistic fantasies of Western power. While the traditional cultural stereotypes employed are indeed challenged in this movie, the dominant social paradigm is always vindicated and reasserted – Bond as always wins through never giving up and using all (including highly unethical) means possible, all the women Bond seeks are conquered, the “traitorous bitch” Vesper Lynd is killed (note that she was traitorous and killed because of love) and society’s order is restored. Yet nevertheless, the Bond franchisers EON have had to add a more realistic self-critical element which will be hard to go back on in future releases. It could entirely be that this self-critical element so popular outside the US strikes a little too close to home for US citizens who are currently watching their own empire decline. This movie is a little *too* introspective for comfort – for the majority of the world including Britain, it’s just pretend make-believe that the West is still in unilateral control like at the start of the 20th century, but for the US, that’s still something they haven’t quite accepted yet.

So maybe, by *Casino Royale* being so realistic about its blatant impossibility, it highlights the decline of the Western model and the increasing need for sustainable forms of interacting with people and Nature. Let us hope so, as the alternative is unpalatable.