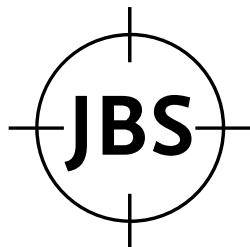


“Not Just a Double-0”

Shifting Embodiments of Female Heroism in *No Time to Die*

MARYLINE KASSAB

This article examines how female characters in *No Time To Die* (2021) re-conceptualise the action hero in the #MeToo era, which has seen the rise of more women creators speaking out on the pitfalls of male leadership (McDougall-Jones 2020). These women protagonists offer a riveting portrayal of feminist activism through their bodies via the multi-sensory capacity of film to create what many film scholars would now consider to be a potentially embodied spectatorship – as opposed to previous models of film spectatorship which limited women as objects of the male gaze and positioned male viewers as the primary spectators of cinematic content (for instance, in Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”). The phenomenological turn in the 1990s, however, moved away from these frameworks and their overemphasis on visual codes to inspect the sensory engagement inherent in the action of viewing a film. Vivian Sobchack, for instance, insisted on the multiple sensory engagements of film, where film translates to “an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt” (1992, 3). Sobchack’s ideas have their roots in phenomenology, particularly in Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Percep-*



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tion (1945). The phenomenological turn espoused by Sobchack was further developed in subsequent scholarship with an emphasis on the sensory connections between film and viewer. As Laura Marks notes of the film viewing process, a film is “grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole” (2000, 145). Drawing on Sobchack’s work, Marks reiterates how in film phenomenology the body of the viewer is conceived as being enfolded “into the cinema”, which functions as “an extension of the viewer’s embodied existence” (ibid., 149).

As such, this article is situated in both the growing strand of scholarship on film phenomenology and action cinema research. It dwells on the changing embodiment of Bond heroines and draws from feminist phenomenological theory to assess how these protagonists might engage in dialogue with viewers on feminist themes of bodily experience and expression. The depiction of the female body in this latest Bond instalment builds and improves upon previous female representations in action cinema, while also being held back to some extent by the problematic context of its own production. In particular, Madeleine Swann’s (Léa Seydoux) experience of maternity and Nomi (Lashana Lynch) and Paloma’s (Ana de Armas) powerful physicalities reflects a clear departure from the objectifying visual frameworks of previous Bond films. What emerges from this study of the Bond franchise is that action films like *No Time To Die* do not simply function as box office magnets, but also reflect the changing nature of female representation and feminism in the film industry at large. These female protagonists thus embody both the power and the pain of the female experience, and in doing so are ideally situated to spark dialogue on feminist issues in a genre dominated by men.

ALWAYS ‘ONATOPP’: FEMALE EMBODIMENT IN THE BROSNAN ERA

In contrast to the early Connery films (1962-1971), female representation across the later Bond series shifted to include more nuanced portrayals of heroes and antiheroes who demonstrated a diverse extent of skills and whose relationships extended far beyond a sexual attachment to Bond. In particular, the Brosnan-era characters constitute a part of the cinematic and televisual period (the late 1980s to mid-1990s) which has arguably contributed much to the feminist development of female protagonists in the action genre. It also corresponds with what Lisa Funnell has identified as the era of the “American Action Hero Bond Girl” (2007, 466). In the two decades preceding the #MeToo era and the rise of female-led action cinema (including superhero films), the Brosnan Bond films showed some signs of progress in terms of diverse representation and agency, though

they did not altogether abandon the sexist framework of the franchise. Especially noteworthy are the *femme fatale* Xenia Onatopp (Famke Janssen) from *GoldenEye* (1995) and the highly accomplished Agent Wai Lin (Michelle Yeoh) from *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). Aside from the Brosnan era's proliferation of female action heroes, this period also sees the introduction of the first female M (Judi Dench) in a previously male-occupied position of leadership. The high-risk activities of espionage, pursuit, and assassination that these women excel at require a formidable amount of bodily strength, technical ability, and stamina. By actively placing themselves in extreme situations, these women heroes and antiheroes more than measure up to Bond's record; in some cases, they even surpass it. These examples serve as counterparts or prototypes to the development of other key Bond protagonists, such as Paloma in *No Time to Die*.

In *GoldenEye*, Onatopp works as the head assassin of Alec Trevelyan (Sean Bean), an MI6 operative-turned-terrorist, but she is not an ordinary killer: she prefers to finish off her targets through acts of sexual domination. Although Onatopp is negatively framed within Bond scholarship (Amacker and Moore 2011, Garland 2009), she demonstrates many of the qualities associated with successful male agents like Bond. For example, while Tony Garland concludes that "her inability to separate sex and death results in her demise" (2009, 185), the same thing could be said of Bond himself; a womanising daredevil who never fails to mix business (death) with pleasure (sex). Her killing of male victims via acts of sexual domination is itself a twisted reflection of Bond's own disposable dealings with women. She is quick-thinking, agile, loyal to a fault, and completely committed to her goal. In short, despite her pathologised sexuality, Onatopp is nothing less than a female Bond; as Helena Bassil-Morozow demonstrates: "she consistently outdoes him in all his favourite activities: driving, killing, risk-taking and having sex with multiple partners" (2020, 99). Even her official introduction in the casino mirrors Bond's opening scene in the first 007 film, *Dr. No* (1962); she is also seated at the centre of the table, clad in black, and in command of every players' attention. Through her body, language, and skill-set, Xenia Onatopp re-appropriates all of the qualities associated with the male action hero – especially James Bond – and gives them a decidedly feminist edge.

Similarly, Agent Wai Lin demonstrates the lethal capacities of Bond; but unlike Bond, who is begrudgingly overseen by M and the shadow of MI6, Lin, while working for Chinese Intelligence, is not shown to report to any superiors. Therefore, in the cinematic world of *Tomorrow Never Dies*, at least, Lin is bound

to no man or master, and represents a more independent agent than Bond himself. Importantly, as Funnell notes more broadly, Yeoh/Lin's "representation in the film offers a new image of Asian femininity that is based on physical abilities and achievements rather than (oriental) sexuality" (2014, 43). Lin's expertise in all areas of pursuit, espionage, and combat mark her out not only as a formidable ally to Bond but as an action hero in her own right. Lin thus disrupts much of the Bond Girl characteristics – submissiveness, weakness, disposability – that have come to typify most female representation in the franchise. Despite her feminist characterisation and action sequences (in one memorable instance, she fights off assailants while handcuffed to Bond on a motorcycle), Lin does not quite escape the patriarchal expectation of heterosexual romance inherent in the Bond universe (this also continues to be the case for many women in the Craig-Era). During the film's climax, Lin has to be rescued from drowning by Bond, and Funnell rightly critiques the final seduction of Lin and views it as undermining of her heroism (2018, 16).

The character of M, while initially conceived in a feminist mould, has also been subjected to the same retrogressive treatment. As a result, M has become a troubling figure of analysis for film scholars such as Peter Kunze, who views her as a conflicted character type which reflects the "patriarchal logic that still persists" in the Bond universe (2015, 238). In the Brosnan films, M's authority goes unchecked for the most part as she is shown to stand up to her male competitors (such as Geoffrey Palmer's Admiral Roebuck in *Tomorrow Never Dies*) and visibly lead the MI6 team. She even casts doubt on Bond's continued relevance in the field, labelling him a "sexist, misogynist dinosaur". But her influence is severely diminished in the Craig reboots, and in *Skyfall* (2012), M is powerless to prevent both external and internal threats to her organisation's security. M is also filmed and presented within stereotypically "maternal" settings such as the bedroom or bathroom, and this serves to visually undermine M's authority within the Bond world of the Craig era; as Michael Boyce has observed, "this clear and consistent invasion of her professional life into her home life works to (re)situate her in the domestic sphere and emphasizes her age" (2015, 280). However, at least as she is presented in the Brosnan-era films, M's character challenges many of the sexist stereotypes of women that proliferate in Bond cinema; as Lori Parks maintains, M "provides a complex representation of female authority in a franchise that is known for emphasizing the sexuality of its female characters" (2015, 255). As an ageing woman in a position of power which allows her to both monitor and mentor Bond, M's centrality to the development of female representation in the

Bond films cannot be underestimated, even if the Craig reboots did much to deconstruct her iconic presence and personality.

Taken as a whole, then, the Brosnan films took significant steps to reverse the negative representation of women in the Bond universe, providing feminist examples of authority (M), diversity (Lin), and physicality (Onatopp). In *No Time to Die*, these qualities are once again revisited and redefined in the characters of Madeleine Swann, Paloma, and Nomi.

“I GET WHY YOU SHOT HIM”: DISRUPTIONS IN CRAIG-ERA BOND WOMEN

If the Brosnan-era films initiated a shift in the representation of women, then the Craig-era instalments can be viewed as both continuing and deviating from their predecessors, especially through the oppositions they set up in the latest film between the bodies of its female characters (Madeleine, Paloma, and Nomi) and that of Bond. Bond’s body has been the subject of previous studies by Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds (2015) which addressed the haptic geographies of the Bond films and also considered how external factors work to shape the development (and sometimes detriment) of Bond’s physical prowess in the film *Skyfall*. I draw partially from Funnell and Dodds configuration of embodiment and power to conduct my own analysis of Craig-era women heroes in *No Time to Die*. In addition, I incorporate previous models of feminist-phenomenological theory (such as Scarth 2004, Ince 2017, and Barker 2009) to probe into the specific embodiments offered by these Bond heroes. In particular, I look at how the strength of their bodies is reflected by the camerawork, costume, and production design, and how their positioning in the various settings of the film works to highlight their mastery of physical space. When relevant, I refer to previous Craig-era films – *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace* (2008), *Skyfall*, and *Spectre* (2015) – throughout my analysis to understand the development of female representation in *No Time to Die*.

While *No Time to Die*’s plot is fairly straightforward (Bond comes out of retirement to stop a deadly techno-virus from being unleashed), the manner in which the film depicts Bond and his body is stylistically and thematically unsettling. This is not to say that the film completely diverges from the Bond formula; like *Spectre*, it attempts to revive, as James Chapman put it, “something of the sense of fun that had rather been lacking from the series in recent years” (2017, 19). However, while it does represent a partial return to the strong women characters of the Brosnan era, it does so under the twisted lens of the film’s troubled production context, as the film’s director, Cary Joji Fukunaga, has been repeat-

edly accused of sexual misconduct by former staff (Cohen and Mercado 2022) – a point that will be revisited later in this analysis. The film also represents the culmination of Craig’s embodiment of Bond and takes the theme of troubled masculine corporeality introduced in *Casino Royale* to its extreme by exposing Bond’s body to an invasive virus that renders him hazardous to the woman he loves. Bond’s masculinity across the reboot films, as represented onscreen through Craig’s muscled body, is subjected to both objectification and decay. Craig’s intense physicality as Bond (especially in comparison to Brosnan’s physique), while in one sense a throwback to the “hard bodies” of 1980s action hero stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, complicates the idea of the heroic body as a measure of masculinity (Tasker 1993, 2015). The reboot inscribes Bond’s body as the site of debilitating pain, with Bond coming very close to death in *Casino Royale* and, ultimately, dying in *No Time to Die*. This is in contrast to the feigned death of Connery’s Bond in *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and his comical rescue from a burning coffin in *Diamonds are Forever* (1971). It is worth noting here, as Katharine Cox has suggested in her analysis of the Bond character’s transformation in *Casino Royale*, that Craig’s nuanced embodiment is “typified by vulnerability and gender ambiguity not explicit in Fleming’s work” (2014, 194), nor indeed to a great extent in the previous Bond films. Further, as Lisa Funnell argues, his body is “exposed, made spectacular and subsequently feminized during scenes of limited physical activity” (such as his semi-nude emergence from the Nassau beach in *Casino Royale*), with Bond effectively replacing “the Bond Girl [...] as the locus of visual spectacle” (2011, 464). While Funnell reads Bond’s survival of physical suffering (such as the genital torture he endures in *Casino Royale*) as augmenting rather than diminishing his heroic status in the reboots (2011, 468), in depicting Bond’s physical trauma so graphically the films to some extent actually undermine his potency as an agent of Britain, and reflect the post-9/11 fears of British national security back onto Bond’s bodily torments. Although Bond’s body, as Klaus Dodds suggests, may be “redeemable” in the way that those of other characters (such as M) are not (2014, 123), it is not spared the harrowing imagery of pain usually reserved for villains, henchmen, or women.

As Bond’s ageing body becomes more implicated and repeatedly tested in scenes which suggest both near-irreparable bodily harm and an underlying homoeroticism, the bodies of the women around become, for the most part, more invulnerable. This is not always the case, however, especially in *Skyfall*, a film “which establishes the legacy of James Bond at the expense of women who are depicted in regressive ways” (Funnell 2018, 17), such as downgrading the former field agent Eve Moneypenny, killing off M, and replacing her with the more tra-

ditional ex-colonel Gareth Mallory (Ralph Fiennes). Post-*Skyfall*, the maternal role that M previously fulfilled (albeit symbolically) is now taken over by the complex and engaging Dr. Madeleine Swann, who bears Bond's daughter, Mathilde. This creates room for an alternative embodied and potentially empowering understanding of maternity in Bond films (a crucial point which will be further developed). Swann has been read as "a composite character comprised of familiar qualities from previous Bond Girls featured across the Connery, Lazenby, Moore, Dalton, and Brosnan eras" (Funnell 2018, 19). However, it is significant to note that *No Time to Die* opens by exploring the physical capacities of its female characters by plunging viewers into the dark backstory of Swann's childhood and thus destabilising the idea of Swann as yet another disposable "Bond Girl".

The opening scene is worth revisiting briefly, here, especially in its creation of an embodied feminism through its depiction of Swann's immediate experience. Swann's childhood home is invaded by Lyutsifer Safin (Rami Malek), her mother (Mathilde Bourbin) is gunned down, and her father, Mr. White, is revealed as the murderer of Safin's family. Swann has little time to react, but manages to keep herself alive during the invasion. The young Swann's physical performance in the film's opening scenes foreshadows the introduction of the film's other female heroes – Nomi and Paloma – and, importantly, frames the last Craig-Bond film through a female perspective (the final image of the film is Swann driving into a tunnel). Throughout the sequence, the young Swann takes cover, infiltrates a secret room, scuttles down corridors, fires a gun, pulls a grown man's bodyweight, runs across a frozen lake, drowns, and survives, all of which exemplify an action hero in the making. She maintains her composure even when faced with both her mother's disparagements and the taunts of Safin, much like Bond's resolute demeanour under Le Chiffre's torture in *Casino Royale*. The scene itself stands as a visual and narrative encapsulation of the film, preceding the claustrophobic, cramped setting of Safin's poison garden and laboratory in the third act, and hinting at the troubled development of Madeleine's relationships with patriarchal figures, including Bond. Swann's evasion of Safin is also marked by stops and starts which come to characterise most of the action sequences of *No Time to Die*. The choice to open the narrative with Swann – a young girl with little experience but immense courage who ultimately overpowers her attacker – points to the film's shifting treatment of female characters. While her attempts to unlock her father's safe room are unsuccessful, the fact that Swann knows of the existence of such a room (and possibly its contents –

fake passports, weapons, etc.) hints at the greater access female characters have to both physical and technical resources in the film. Furthermore, Swann demonstrates practicality and foresight when she tries to hide the still-unconscious body of Safin in the woods – acting not only in defence of her absent father, but also in her own self-protection. Swann’s quick thinking and purposeful action carry over to her older self in the film, when she struggles to protect her daughter Mathilde from Safin.

Tellingly, the shooting of Swann’s mother is not shown on screen; Swann only hears the barrage of bullets from another room. This fits with the film’s treatment of female bodies more generally: they are not, as with other Craig-era films like *Casino Royale* and *Skyfall*, presented as casualties of Bond’s mission or remnants of his difficult past. Swann’s spaces – whether her offices, rooms, or family home – are entirely hers (as well as being populated with personal props such as her Tamagotchi). More importantly, she does not appear as a superfluous addition to a set piece (e.g., Severine’s stagey appearance on the casino’s staircase in *Skyfall*). The camera follows Madeleine’s movements intimately, but it does not trap her body in dangerous angles like Vesper Lynd’s (Eva Green) tragic underwater ending in *Casino Royale*. The offscreen demise of Madeleine’s mother – a hard drinking, chain smoking woman confined to her couch – thus acts as the film’s ultimate refusal of the static image of the Bond girl as trapped within physical spaces and “vices”, replacing it with Swann’s more heroic embodiment. Swann’s later development into a practising psychologist with her own office – her own space, as shown in both *Spectre* and *No Time to Die* – further stresses Swann’s control of her physical environment; she is an integral, rather than a disposable, part of the Bond world. Indeed, it is Bond who is shown as the outlier to her sphere; looking out of place in both her original office in *Spectre* and later at her neatly furnished home in *No Time to Die*.

The decision to begin the film from the point of view of a female character is significant, especially after the regressive gender politics of *Skyfall* and *Spectre* (see Funnell 2018, 17). In a way, it harks back to the agency of women in the Brosnan era, specifically the early scenes of *GoldenEye* with Onatopp’s car chase, where Onatopp is established as a real challenge to Bond. But its feminist content could also be related to the contributions of *Fleabag* (2016-2019) creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who is unique in the reboots’ production history for being the only woman on the screenwriting team during the Craig era. This all points back to the need for more female involvement in the film industry in general, and the Bond franchise specifically. Perhaps if the film were also directed by a woman, however, it would have avoided the controversy generated by director

Cary Joji Fukunaga's conduct towards actresses and female co-workers. While Fukunaga actively voiced his support for #MeToo as part of his push to create strong characters for the film (Roundtree 2022), he has been accused by many women (including actress Rachelle Vinberg) of sexual grooming and harassment. This context complicates (but does not entirely cancel) the feminist potential of *No Time to Die*. In the light of Fukunaga's accusations, the film's female characters take on even greater significance, fighting as they are both inside and outside the Bond narrative. I argue that it is possible, given Waller-Bridge's timely contributions, to view these characters as part of a feminist push in action cinema, and that the film also serves as a warning for Hollywood to practise what it preaches in the #MeToo era: putting more female directors in charge of both standalone blockbusters and action franchises. In any case, by beginning the film from a young, pre-adolescent woman's point of view (an underrepresented group in action genres as a whole), *No Time to Die* opens up the possibility for more diverse representation in Bond film franchise. This also challenges viewers to rethink what women's bodies in action film are capable of; in this Bond film especially, the depiction of young Swann acting out the major tasks of an action hero in a high stakes situation does much to reverse the trend of disposable and incompetent women characters set into motion by the reboots.

Swann's mastery of body, space, and place also extends to her maternity. Interestingly, viewers are never shown Swann giving birth. There is a brief moment on the train (during the pre-title sequence) when she quickly clutches her belly, but it is almost imperceptible. Instead, the closest image to pregnancy and insemination the film provides is Bond's own infection with Heracles, the nanobot bioweapon developed by Safin and the scientist Valdo Obruchev (David Dencik). This aligns with previous films in their presentation of Bond's body (as Cox 2014 and Funnell and Dodds 2015 have noted) as both "feminised" and essentially vulnerable to outside threats. The displacement of Madeleine's insemination onto Bond is in fact a double insemination; the first, unwittingly, by the Heracles-carrying Swann when she hesitates in touching and potentially killing Blofeld, and the second by Safin in the poison garden, which gains more significance when considered in the light of the film's climax. Infected twice with nanobots (the second dose ensuring lethal consequences should Bond go anywhere near Madeleine and their daughter), Bond's decision to sacrifice himself effectively "gives birth" to both Mathilde's continued future and for Nomi to continue her role as a female 007 without Bond's interference. In any case, Swann retains her bodily integrity, as she is not shown weakened by the process

of pregnancy; she chose (unlike Bond's second, bloody "insemination" with the virus) to bear Mathilde and she is spared the graphic imagery of bodily invasion that befalls both Bond and Blofeld.

The film's visual substitution of Swann's pregnancy with Bond's infection has interesting parallels with and implications for feminist and film theory. It opens up space in the Bond film canon for considering the pregnant female body as a site of both action and trauma which problematises the process of Othering implicit in female/male dynamics. This is cinematically significant as it overlaps with previous depictions of pregnancy in action film, especially *Alien* (1979), in which a foreign body preys upon and effectively impregnates the male protagonists. In her book, *The Other Within, Ethics, Politics, and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir*, Fredrika Scarth offers a critical revision of de Beauvoir's writing on the intrusive nature of pregnancy, which "portrays the female as attacked and invaded by a hostile other" (2004, 140). For instance, de Beauvoir describes the woman's foetus as "a part of her body [...] a parasite that feeds on it; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it" (1989, 495). However, Scarth argues that de Beauvoir's problematisation of pregnancy is not so much a disgust or dismissal of maternity, but rather an attempt to show how such images of "threatened boundaries and invasion [...] can lead to the assumption of otherness within [...] and the need to assume our own otherness rather than project it outside ourselves" (150). In contrast to the mind-body dualism pervading Western philosophical tradition, pregnancy is here read as standing for an embodied form of subjectivity, in which the "maternal subject directly challenges the conception of subjectivity as pure transcendence" (ibid., 149). An embodied subjectivity in this sense is neither total objectification (e.g., woman as body alone or reduced to her trauma) nor transcendence, but an acknowledgement of the limits, constraints, and dangers (as well as the opportunities) that having a body implies. As Scarth notes, "the body both gives a world populated by other freedoms and encloses us in solitude" (ibid., 165). By extension, the pregnant body is the "extreme case of the interdependence and ambiguity of all embodied subjects" (ibid., 166).

Read against the background of *No Time to Die*, the transfer of the virus/pregnancy into Bond's body functions as a cinematic expression of maternity as described by de Beauvoir and developed by later feminist theorists such as Scarth on embodiment, who sees Beauvoirian philosophy as "both a plea that we accept the tension of our human embodiment and a claim that equality and freedom require the lucid acceptance of this tension" (Scarth, 165). Bond's visible assumption of "otherness" in the form of the Heracles virus invading his system frees Swann in some part from the burden of pregnancy, allowing her to con-

tinue her psychiatric practice, but in showing Bond suffering it also hints at the offscreen trauma Swann has had to endure. His inability to be near Mathilde or Swann after infection also plays out as a sharp reversal of the shunning and control of the female pregnant body in patriarchal systems. To quote de Beauvoir, this severs Bond from thinking of his body as “a direct and normal connection with the world”, becoming instead “a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it” (15). The shame and suffering associated with pregnant embodiment is thus removed from Swann’s narrative and lived out through Bond’s painful demise; it is Bond’s body, not Swann’s, that becomes the literal “plaything of obscure forces” (ibid., 495). At the same time, Bond’s insemination and self-imposed isolation/destruction works as retribution for his own enforced separation and rejection of Swann at the beginning of the film, when he parts ways with her on the train. It also visually fulfils Blofeld’s earlier warning to Bond that when Swann’s secret “finds its way out, and it will, it’ll be the death of you”. The “secret” becomes emblematic of the offscreen pregnancy and pain that Bond previously denied himself from co-experiencing with Swann. By holding Bond as morally responsible for the physical and emotional pain endured by Swann, *No Time to Die* unravels some of the ambiguity and double standards in patriarchal taboos surrounding the pregnant body. However, by not showing Swann’s painful pregnancy, it also makes room for the free maternity espoused by Scarth’s reading of de Beauvoir. Building on an ethics of embodied subjectivity and free maternity, Scarth earlier notes that “only when women have the concrete opportunities to express their subjectivity in the world will they be able to undertake maternity freely” (148). In a sense, *No Time to Die*’s depiction of Swann’s absent maternity not only allows viewers to see her equipped with the agency to craft a family life and a career separate to Bond’s, but it also offers them space to reflect on alternative conceptions of maternal embodiment which are shared and experienced (albeit unwillingly) through Bond’s body.

Conversely, Swann’s character is not granted an equal level of agency to the other female characters in *No Time to Die*. Like Vesper Lynd in *Casino Royale*, Swann’s romantic attachment to Bond puts her in physical and psychological danger, even if she does partially evade Safin’s grasp. She also has to be rescued twice by both Safin (at the beginning of the film) and Bond (at its climax). While her maternity is not a liability exactly, her connection to Bond as father of her child and reformed lover is characterised by sacrifice and rejection. After Swann is framed as working for SPECTRE, Bond allows his enclosed car, with both himself and Swann in it, to be shot at from all directions by SPECTRE henchmen.

Although the windows are impregnable to bullets, Swann is visibly traumatised by Bond's coldness and the imminent danger of the shooting squad; his behaviour is not only self-centred, but also textbook abusive in the way he refuses to acknowledge Swann's anxiety. Only at the last minute does Bond show any sign of mercy and open fire on the henchmen. After their escape, however, Bond continues withdrawing his affection and cuts Swann off from his life, placing her on a train with no intention of ever seeing her again. In these moments, Swann comes across as a totally different character, one at the mercy of both Bond and Safin, who later captures her and Mathilde. Swann's regression, however, is in some part mitigated by Bond's demise, and her own survival long after Safin's base is destroyed. The likelihood of Swann appearing in another film is thus sustained, and there is also the possibility of building on the character of Bond's daughter.

Agents Paloma and Nomi fare better than Swann, in some respects. Paloma's racy glamour fits more closely with the filmic world of Bond women overall, but both she and Nomi represent a return to the "Action Hero Bond Girl" of the 1990s with their energetic physicality and the single-minded pursuit of their mission. Crucially, in a film where Bond's body becomes prey to a lethal technical invasion, the bodies of these female agents take on greater significance as filmic expressions of female invulnerability to male attack. In doing so, they reverse and contest the outcomes of patriarchal oppression in the film industry more broadly. They function as cinematic icons of female strength in the face of such systemic adversity and discrimination. In another sense, however, these contemporary action heroines have the potential to embody the themes of personal survival implicit in the #MeToo movement: they offer female viewers a means of re-enacting the collective narrative of fighting against the patriarchy through their embodiment of female strength. They share this critical aspect with other action heroines in current cinema and television, including the Marvel franchise. Much like Black Widow and Princess Shuri/Black Panther fighting against powerful male antagonists in their standalone films, these Bond heroines are also shown retaliating against various forms of unchecked male power – and, importantly, succeeding.

In the film's chronology, Paloma is introduced after Nomi, but much of what can be said about Nomi is also applicable to Paloma, in terms of her physical, technical, and tactical prowess. Paloma's scenes in Cuba are brief, but her character, like Michelle Yeoh's Wai Lin, shows much promise from a feminist standpoint. Paloma wears a backless dark dress which partially reveals her chest. However, while this fashion choice runs the risk of sexualising the character, this

is reduced somewhat by her confidence and effectiveness as a fighter. As the scene analysis below will outline, Paloma's action sequences and conduct mark her out as a physically competent and charismatic field agent. In the Cuban bar scene, Paloma takes on an overwhelming number of SPECTRE agents alongside Bond. In one memorable sequence she completes a circular manoeuvre on the floor and succeeds in shooting all of her assailants from this precarious angle. Like Lin, Paloma is an eager young agent: she is well prepared, and possesses a light charm which adds a degree of innocence to the film. While this also runs the risk of infantilising Paloma's character, her cavalier attitude harks back to the feigned effortlessness of Brosnan's Bond in completing his missions. Though she is obviously glamorous, she is not involved in any seduction sequences, and, importantly, does not have a romantic relationship with Bond. In some respects, Paloma fulfils a similar role to that of Bond's CIA ally Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright).

She can also be compared to Camille Montes (Olga Kurylenko), an earlier action Bond Girl in *Quantum of Solace*. Save for a kiss from Bond that is met with indifference, Montes, like Paloma, is not romantically involved with Bond. As Funnell notes, Montes "can move beyond the sexual(ised) expectations/limitations of the Bond Girl and be judged for her intentions and actions in the film" (2018, 16). Montes's drive in the film is to avenge her family by tracking down and destroying General Medrano (Joaquin Cosio); a rapist, killer, and arsonist who is also entangled with Bond's own enemy, Dominic Greene (Mathieu Amalric). In the last shootout of the film, Montes relives and rewrites her family trauma of seeing her mother and sister violated by Medrano. She saves the hotel steward who was nearly raped by Medrano, and, after a long, hand-to-hand struggle, succeeds in shooting the General. While her story concludes the film on an "empowering and even feminist note" (Funnell 2018, 17), Montes still needs saving by Bond, who shoots at a gas canister (and almost before he is about to euthanise Montes to save her from the pain of burning) to allow them to escape the hotel fire. Furthermore, despite her own physical agency, for the most part Montes follows rather than leads Bond throughout his mission, and does not quite reach the independence of Paloma or Wai Lin as a woman character acting in her own interests (and unconnected to familial legacies). The character of Paloma, in contrast to Montes, is thus important not only for her ability as an action hero, but her freedom as an independent operator in the Bond world.

While Paloma is presented as obviously and perhaps even overtly glamorous, and while some aspects of her performance border on a parody of young

femininity (e.g., her giddy exclamations to Bond), her short action sequence is emblematic of a shift in contemporary filmmaking which prioritises female characters' physical agency. As Kate Ince notes, this is characterised by a depiction of the female body which is "head-on, with attention to activity, effort and movement, and without fetishistic fragmentation" (2017, 51). In other words, this also translates to a positioning of female characters' bodies onscreen as the source of – rather than the means for – action; it is women's movements that are driving the narrative, the filming, and the performance of a scene. Paloma's physical movements are mimicked by the camera (a point further developed in the next section) – straining to secure her target shots, dashing from one corner to the next – and her body is captured from angles which stress her mastery of the disintegrating combat space. Further, as a bold counterpart to Bond's iconic 007 theme, Paloma gets her own action soundtrack; a snappy, Latinised beat as she runs to defeat her attackers. As a female Cuban agent, her triumph against the SPECTRE agents and her destruction of their headquarters' predominantly white and masculine space reads more broadly as a feminist takeover of the Bond film's gendered spaces. While she blends in with her opulent attire, Paloma does not resort to simple seduction nor does she seek to attract male attention; instead, she is there to gather information, much like Wai Lin's restrained socialising at Carver's press party in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Both characters share an ability to navigate spaces and defeat their enemies with preparedness and panache. Conversely, Craig's Bond seems to lack these qualities, as he misreads or even ignores many of the initial cues to action as his mission unfolds. Despite the brevity of Paloma's scenes, they mark a key moment in the film where Bond's ageing physicality is contrasted with the energetic embodiment of a female newcomer; this contrast also puts Bond's capacity for action further into question by showing that Paloma pulls most of the strings and takes the lead in the shootout. Finally, while Paloma and Bond are effectively working against Nomi in this scene, the inclusion of two women driving the trajectory of a key action sequence is also significant, especially as between Paloma's quick manoeuvres and Nomi's steady tactics Bond's own movements fade into the background.

But this scene is significant for another reason, too. It marks one of the few instances in Bond films where almost the entire action and filming of a scene revolves around the movements of a female character. The body of Paloma thus intimately implicates the viewer, especially the female viewer, in the action unfolding onscreen. In her book, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and The Cinematic Experience* (2009), Jennifer Barker posits a useful phenomenological structure for thinking about the relationship between film and viewer. Barker's analysis draws primarily

from existential philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenology and his interest in sensory perception, explored throughout his *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and The Invisible* (1968). She proposes a tripartite division of "skin", "musculature", and "viscera" to theorise the different modalities of physical experience in the act of film viewing. Barker notes that "viewer and film are two differently constructed but equally muscular bodies, acting perhaps in tandem or perhaps at odds with each other, but always in relation to each other" (72). She goes on to clarify that "viewers are not passive participants in this engagement; we may be drawn to the film and also (perhaps simultaneously) pushed away by it" (ibid.). This reciprocal, push-pull dynamic is likened by Barker to a handshake and a chase, in which "two bodies muscular movements or gestures, which are mimetic to some degree, create an entity that is larger than the individual movements of either one alone" (ibid.). Essentially, Barker argues for an understanding of film that acknowledges the sensory dynamic between film and viewer occurring at any point of the film viewing process, stating that "the empathy between the film's and viewer's bodies goes so deeply that we can feel the film's body [...] though we ourselves have hardly moved a muscle" (ibid., 83). Key to her analysis is the mimetic connection of film and viewer, which builds on Linda Williams' (1991) seminal work on mimicry in body genres and Laura Marks' (2000) writing on mimesis: "film and viewer are in a relation of muscular empathy that is an oscillation between difference and similarity, proximity and distance" (ibid., 75). While Barker's framework moves beyond just characters and character identification in film, I would like to revisit the idea of musculature to include the movements of characters on film alongside the film/camera's movements as outlined by Barker.

To apply this more closely to Paloma's action sequences would be to consider the different ways in which her body is incorporated into the "body" of the film itself. In addition to wearing a dark outfit which allows her to tonally blend in with the sophisticated SPECTRE crowds at the hotel, Paloma's physicality is deeply integrated into *No Time to Die*'s filmic body, specifically as the camera "mimics" and sometimes anticipates Paloma's movements. In one instance, she walks towards the entrance of the hotel shooting the entire time, and the camera tracks her focused steps, stopping when she stops (and just before she realises she is out of ammunition). When Paloma then takes cover, the camera also follows her furtive movements, swerving back behind a darkened column. Likewise, as she takes on the armed SPECTRE agents awaiting her and performs an energetic jump kick, the camera "leaps" into the action as well, reflecting Paloma's rapid

fighting style. Finally, as she grabs a fallen gun and shoots the last of agents, the camera is also situated on the ground; a floor angle from which Paloma expertly takes the shot. In these and other instances, by situating Paloma as the source of the action, the film replicates the cinematographic attention usually focused on Bond and shifts it to a female action character instead, even in moments of pause when Paloma shares a quick drink with Bond before fighting again. Following Barker's framework, I would argue that Paloma creates for female viewers a cinematic space in which to explore the limits and potentials of their shared embodiment. While Paloma is given a minor role in the film, her action sequence effectively ticks many of the boxes for a physically engaging and feminist action hero in the #MeToo era.

Similarly, Nomi also stands out as an action protagonist with feminist potential. Most significantly, as a Black female character, she survives the film and outlives Bond himself, which has not always been the case, as Camille Alexander notes of Black characters in the Roger Moore film *Live and Let Die* (1973): "Blacks cannot triumph in Bond's universe, even though Bond himself can move in and out of their worlds" (A2020, 13). In *Live and Let Die*, Gloria Hendry plays Rosie Carver, a double agent who is Bond's first Black love interest in the series, but Carver lacks Bond's espionage talents and pales in comparison to Blaxploitation heroines like Tamara Dobson's portrayal of the lead character in *Cleopatra Jones*, released in the same year as *Live and Let Die* (Alexander, 12). In the Brosnan era, Halle Berry played NSA agent Jinx Johnson in *Die Another Day* (2002). While Johnson was depicted for the most part in positive ways which emphasised her combat, pursuit, and intelligence-gathering abilities, her first scene in the film detracted from her agency by having her emerge – much like the first film Bond Girl, Honey Ryder, played by Ursula Andress in *Dr. No* – from the beach in a bikini and filmed from the point of view of Bond's gaze. Like many Bond women, Johnson is both rescued and seduced by Bond, which, like Wai Lin, undermines the feminist potential of her character. Nomi, however, is neither rescued nor seduced by Bond, nor is she shown through an objectifying lens. On the contrary, Nomi is the one doing the rescuing and seducing. In her first scene, she drives Bond on her scooter to his home after his car breaks down, to what he thinks will be a night cap and a one-night stand. However, Nomi reveals her identity as an MI6 agent quite quickly and removes her wig in Bond's bedroom just before she speaks in her own accent, effectively undoing years of stereotypical female characterisations in the franchise. In the final scenes of the film, Nomi takes down Obruchev after he makes a racist quip about eradicating the West African diaspora, to which she replies, "Do you know what time it is? Time to

die". Her reply mirrors the title of the film, and it is promising that Nomi, twice the Other as both Black and a woman, has the final word in a franchise traditionally dominated by white men.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Following the Harvey Weinstein scandal, many female creators and commentators have been left wondering about the future of women's representation both on and offscreen. While the slow but steady increase of female protagonists in blockbuster cinema, especially action features, constitutes only a small part of the broader campaign for justice in Hollywood, it still represents a step forward in the battle for equal workplace rights. This logic extends to the continuation of the #MeToo movement in general. Just as social media offered a convenient platform for women to speak up about harassment and abuse, so too can popular film provide a chance for female viewers to collectively experience an embodied feminism through the exploits of its fearless protagonists. While some of us, like Paloma, may have only had three weeks training or less in the fight for equality, all women can benefit from a greater insistence on and experience of female representation in film.

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