# Physiques/Physics Over Figures

Some Thoughts on James Bond's Nostalgia

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● ● ● The identifying three dots. Brief theme music. James Bond enters an apartment and finds another MI6 agent shot and dying. In constant contact with MI6's screen-filled headquarters, Bond, on the instructions of M, abandons the dying agent and, in a car driven by female agent, Eve, begins pursuing the culprit, who, it seems, has stolen a computer drive with a complete list of NATO agents. Thus ensues a twelve-minute action sequence that begins with a car chase through the crowded streets of Istanbul, a car wreck and gun fight with the malefactor and the police who have also been chasing them, and a motorcycle chase across the tiled roofs of the city (again, all tracked by the location services on headquarters screens). Then the pursued villain leaps onto a train pulling out of a station, and Bond subsequently leaps onto the moving train from his motorcycle. Fisticuffs on the roofs of speeding train cars ensue; the villain uncouples the cars in which Bond is riding from the front of the train. Bond then deploys a steam shovel on the disconnected car to reconnect the back part of the train to the front, crawls over the shovel head into a car he has used the steam shovel to crash into, and catches up with the villain. There are more fist fights on top of the train cars, as the train weaves through mountains and goes in and out of tunnels. During this protracted railroad battle, Eve has continued to chase the train in her vehicle, which headquarters still tracks. Beating the train to a junction with a bridge, Eve
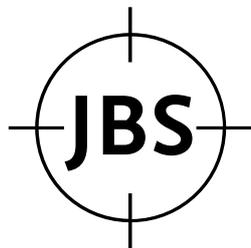
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tells headquarters she can see the two men fighting, but that she does not have a clear shot. Headquarters orders her to shoot anyway. She fires and hits Bond, who falls into a deep lake. Title sequence.

The 2012 James Bond film *Skyfall* continues the Bond tradition of elaborate opening chase sequences that depend primarily upon the physical capabilities of humans and associated machines (cars, motorcycles, trains, airplanes, boats). Despite headquarters' quaint tracking of Bond in *Skyfall*'s opening sequence, Bond's talents still consist mainly of his rapid physical responses, his ability to discern accurately relative speed and space, his physical strength, his hand-to-hand combat skills, his inventiveness with machines' capabilities (using the steam shovel to re-hook the train cars, for example), and his general ability to withstand physical punishment. There is really nothing new here – in fact, it quite openly resurrects the old Bond aura even though the now computer-festooned headquarters has that busy, post-90s wallpapered-with-screens look that is supposed to suggest immensely calculated control. But screens do not necessarily signal improved efficiency or judgment, as orders from that algorithmically-managed centre have nothing but perhaps a negative bearing on the outcome of Bond's battle: M gives Eve what turns out to be the wrong command, to shoot at the villain as he battles Bond on the train.

This typically elaborate and prolonged opening sequence, along with the rest of the film, makes decidedly visible one of the persistent dynamics of the James Bond film tradition: nostalgia for a time when humans governed machines; nostalgia for past Bond adventures. But even the earliest Bond films, *Dr. No* (1962) and *From Russia With Love* (1963), are nostalgic, already staging these human battles with (albeit primitive) calculating machines and other electronic "technologies". And the human advantage, in the end, is always an inventive physicality, a flexibility that can think beyond and outside of calculation, and that finally rests on the talents and courage of an agent capable of operating himself beyond the capacities of calculation.

The word "nostalgia" originally meant homesickness – a desire to return to a previous time and place. By the time the James Bond series gets to its most recent additions, *Skyfall* and *Spectre* (2015), this nostalgia erupts overtly and repeatedly not only in direct reference to the agent's preferred "physical" methods, but also to characters and events from the past as well as the previous films' style, pace, episodic quality, and multiple, exotic settings. In *Skyfall*, although MI6's headquarters have moved underground as a result of Raoul Silva's computer attack, the new, creepy, unfamiliar setting stylistically anticipates the nostalgia of the film's long final battle that takes place at Bond's desolate childhood manse in

the wilds of Scotland. Only the temporary headquarters, which now displays a proliferation of apparently-informative screens on its dingy walls, has moved energetically into the age of calculation. This shift in the headquarters' appearance and now-stolid dependence on algorithmic machines, however, reprises what had been, in the pre-1990s Bond films, the computer-enabled ambitions of humanity's enemies – from Dr. No's missile control in *Dr. No* and Goldfinger's computers and lasers in *Goldfinger* (1964), to Blofeld's computer-controlled oil rig and satellite in *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971).

Skyfall and *Spectre* together consolidate what has been nostalgically evident in the Bond films all along: the battle between human heroes who rely on human skills and the power-hungry ambitions of computer-dependent demagogues for world domination. These two films not only make this earlier pattern even more definitively evident, they also locate computing machines themselves as the enablers of such ambitions. Just as the villains of these two films have amplified their power exponentially by expanding both the deployment and the range of their computers, so Bond faces even more threatening, inhumane, and apparently omniscient opponents that have become encompassing systems that, in their permeation of informational networks, are now omnipotent. And other "networks" do not defeat such networks – only human *aegis*, only human talents, only human fortitude, only Bond can.

The computer-aided enemy that has long been a feature of Bond films is, alas, no longer a mere specter – a science-fiction potential in diegeses in which megalomaniac criminals employ calculating machines to aid their attempts at world domination. Before the wide distribution of computers to consumers and the availability of the internet to commercial use, calculating machines connoted a kind of elite specialisation akin to something like the space programme. In fact, space programmes were Bond's computer villains' first targets, as the potential for such systems to control human beings is present in the earliest Bond films – such as Dr No's missile toppling plot. Although often employed in the films as a tool for the villains, calculating machines, originally deployed as support for missiles, satellites, and other control mechanisms operating from space, become themselves a means of direct control over human activities. The idea of information-controlling entities who manage systems in their own interest may be currently more a condition of contemporary life than a species of heroic-fiction adversary, as *Skyfall* and *Spectre* both feature villains whose *modus operandi* are entirely algorithmic, manifesting a deep nostalgia for a time before calculation machine control. In *Spectre*, Oberhauser/Blofeld organises a criminal conspiracy to

control all of the world's information-gathering agencies – a project in which the duplicitous government official "C" not only participates but has convinced the British government to join whole-heartedly, to the demise of the traditional Double-O agent. In *Skyfall* Bond's battle with the technocratic Raoul Silva openly reveals the deep nostalgia for a more human time that subtends all Bond films.

If *Spectre* culls the elements of the Bond tradition in a stand-off between man (Mallory) and computing machine (C) in a future manipulated by criminal machinic control and a past of human heroism, *Skyfall* has already staged this battle in explicit and nostalgic terms. With *Skyfall*, the battle of human and machine is more overt and literalised; this sense of nostalgia leads Bond to take M "home", back to Scotland, where physical strength, endurance, and a touch of human psychology triumphs over the resentful, psychotic criminal and his various machines. The battle is a human one; though Bond deploys certain machinic aids, ultimately the course of action he takes is human. Mallory, whom *Skyfall* presents as the enemy of old-fashioned tactics, becomes the head of MI6. By the time we get to *Spectre*, we even become somewhat nostalgic for Mallory himself, whose vision of human tactics, though much more restricted than the previous M's, is much better than the tactics advocated by the computer-inflated C. Memories of previous Bond films always animate subsequent Bond films – a certain nostalgia for loss that motivates Bond's continued battle for human dignity. Nostalgia becomes a motivating factor for Bond's determination, as the enemies in the later Bond films continue to act as revivals of nemeses Bond has faced in previous outings: Mr. White, for instance, appears repeatedly throughout *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace*, and *Spectre*; and Blofeld's return in *Spectre* signals a cyclical return to the origins of Bond's arch-nemesis of the 1960s.

As far back as the mid-1990s, Bond was fighting computer-supported enemies with human cunning and resilience. In *Goldeneye* (1995), Bond takes on the evil "Goldeneye" project, a satellite designed to neutralise and destroy all electronic systems. The conflict in this film is a battle over the electronic weapons that destroy *other* computer systems (electronics versus electronics) – though, as we might expect, Bond saves the day with his own physical prowess, destroying the electronic malefactor and traitor Trevelyan by impaling him on literal metal antenna. Coming as it does at the dawn of the internet's pervasiveness, *Goldeneye* illustrates the conflict between human resourcefulness and the destructive power of electronics. *Goldeneye* also represents something of a turning point in Bond's methodologies: whereas the Bond from the Sixties onwards very much relied upon the outlandish technologies provided to him by Q Branch, Brosnan's Bond saw a shift towards human wiliness, will power, and perseverance that has all but

come to define the Daniel Craig era – an era that is largely concerned with the physical mechanics of the agent as an embodied human being, separate from the technology he (at times) employs. However, *Goldeneye* is also anticipatory. If, in its presentation of post-Soviet activity, the film becomes a nostalgic point for Cold War narratives, it also anticipates in broad terms the ensuing systemic battles between humans and calculating machines that continue in future Bond films – as well as nostalgia for the former battles it rehearses yet again.

Similarly, Bond's first cinematic encounter with Spectre – in *Dr. No* – anticipates his most recent one. Evil terrorist organisations pit themselves against legitimate governments using sophisticated technologies, whose only counter is a species of physical disruption perpetrated by the always-infiltrating Bond. Signaling the nature of the battles to come, *Dr. No* lays out the terms of engagement: evildoers plan massive destructive strikes with electronic machines, challenging governments and legitimate order. MI6 sends Bond to investigate. Representatives of the malefactors chase Bond with mechanical (as opposed to electronic) machines. Bond gets the best of them (usually) or is captured (sometimes). If captured, Bond is taken to a secret headquarters filled with elaborately lit, whirring, toxic electronic gear. Bond manages to escape and destroy the gear and hence the evildoers' plans. The human world is safe, even as governments increasingly buoy themselves up with electronic equipment. The cautionary warning is clear: developing electronic weaponry as a means of bypassing the human element is detrimental. Invisible, unpredictable, deadly: only the most humanly-capable of humans can triumph in the battle against the encroaching electronic machinic forces.

The Bond series, it might be argued, is largely organised along the battle lines between the human and calculating machines. On the one side, the "old ways", the clever, resourceful, lithe, successfully combative, penetrating Double-O agents, representing the human potential and capability that is in danger of becoming extinct. On the other side, the calculating mechanics which govern everything from space missile programme in *Dr. No* to all human activity in *Spectre*. What Bond has been fighting for more than fifty years is the possibility that all that is human will be overtaken by the greedy whims of maniacal despots deploying computers not for the good of humanity but to increase their own wealth and power bases. The battle between human/good and technology/bad that is repeatedly played out in the Bond films is also one that is occurring at present in the real world. Within the Bond films, the vision of a world governed by computers used to enforce the interests of a few avaricious despots looks,

through a nostalgic lens, like a cautionary warning of the ills that are to come –
and, indeed, may already be with us.

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