

Skyfall

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Skyfall. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. Daniel Craig; Judi Dench; Javier Bardem. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 2012.

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Introduction

SKYFALL, the twenty-third James Bond film, premiered in London at the Royal Albert Hall on the 23rd October 2012. It was directed by Sam Medes with Daniel Craig reprising Bond for the third time. The release coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Bond film series, which commenced with *Dr. No* in 1962.

Skyfall is the seventh highest grossing film of all time and the highest grossing film in the United Kingdom. Accolades include the BAFTA Awards for Outstanding British Film and Best Film Music; the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Stunt Ensemble in a Motion Picture; and Academy Awards for Best Sound Editing, and Best Original Song (Adele).

James Bond has been traditionally viewed as a cipher for empire and indeed, it has been argued that “the Bond franchise continues to exist as an anachronistic symbol of British influence in matters of style and politics” (Hoa 3). However, Bond has also been associated with science-fictional themes, primarily through the involvement of futuristic gadgetry invented by white-coated boffins in secret laboratories.

Skyfall is different and shockingly depicts Bond as an “aging hero [...] no longer equal to the physical rigors of his job, and yet unable to abandon it” (1), as well as exposing the potential and controversial “obsolescence of the Bond universe, along with everything it stands for” (3).

This essay will examine the film’s principal *leitmotifs*, renewal, rebirth and redemption, with a constant juxtaposition and belligerent tension between the old and the new, ultimately proving that the timeworn may be successfully revived and resurrected in order to continue to play a useful and active role even in a modern and high-tech society. All quotations are derived from the film, unless otherwise indicated.

The plot revolves around a former and completely disgraced M16 agent (Raoul Silva) who elaborately plans to discredit, humiliate and eventually kill M (the head of

MI6, a branch of the British secret service), who he feels had betrayed him.

Film

The first intimation of this trope is to be found in the theme song:

This is the end [...] I’ve drowned and dreamt this moment [...] Let the sky fall When it crumbles We will stand tall Face it all together [...] Skyfall is where we start A thousand miles and poles apart Where worlds collide and days are dark.

The drowning theme is prominent, echoing Bond’s near death by submergence after falling into a deep ravine early in the film, having sustained a chest wound by friendly fire. Bond survives, almost as if the drowning constitutes a baptism into a new life. But he initially spends some time as a beach bum, before an explosion at MI6 prompts his return.

The song is accompanied by disturbing and nihilistic visual sequences that are darker than those usually introducing Bond films, focusing on death through the use of dripping blood and falling knives that turn to cross-shaped headstones and skulls in cemeteries, along with Bond cardboard targets riddled with bullet holes. These have replaced the usual female silhouettes that have conventionally functioned as signifiers for the sexual activity that accompanies Bond films.

Several times during the film, Bond and M are accused of being relics of a bygone age, dinosaurs who lack the resilience to adapt to the modern world. This results in a tension with younger elements throughout the narrative.

When Bond returns back to England, he meets M at her house, the actual former house of John Barry (1933-2011) who created the signature Bond theme song and who also produced film scores for many Bond films. M is initially cross with Bond, demanding to know “where the hell have you been? [...] Why didn’t you call? [...] Ran out of drink where you were, did they?” an intimation that the traditional hard drinking and other excesses are no longer acceptable.

The gaunt, unshaven, drink-addled and somewhat inebriated Bond quips sardonically “enjoying death. 007 reporting for duty. [...] You didn’t get the postcard? You should try it sometime, get away from all

of it. It really lends perspective.” More seriously he wonders whether he has been in the profession “maybe too long. [...] So this is it. We’re both played out,” a notion that M quashes: “speak for yourself.”

On his return to MI6, he faces gruelling physical and mental tests, as well as tough assessments of critical skills, such as marksmanship. He clearly feels his age on several occasions and despite failing these appraisals, M decides to return him to active duty, creating a fallen hero who must rise to this extraordinary occasion. As a further sign of renewal, he shaves his greying beard, instantly acquiring a smarter and more youthful appearance. However, he clearly does not fully embrace new times and ways, shaving with a straight (cut throat) razor, averring: “I like to do some things the old-fashioned way,” to which the Bond girl assents “sometimes the old ways are the best.” This exact same phrase is later repeated by an old family retainer, re-emphasising the maxim that the new is not automatically better than the old.

Bond also returns to duty without the snazzy gadgets to which audiences have become accustomed to over the years. His first encounter with the quartermaster, Q, is fraught with symbolism. They meet in the National Gallery and both sit facing the west wall of room 34, a chamber replete with emblematic British paintings. Three paintings by John M. W. Turner face them, two clearly, *Rain, Steam and Speed—The Great Western Railway* (1844) to the right and *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up* (1839) directly in front of the duo, the painting on which the camera lingers longest.

These paintings accentuate two themes: the old replacing the new and the quintessential Britishness of Bond. The former of the two paintings contains a small hare just in front and to the right of the train’s front end, and this may symbolise the violent encroachment of the pastoral countryside, represented by the hare, which is running out of the way of the oblivious and uncaring juggernaut. The latter painting portrays an old and venerable but redundant warship, a retired three-masted warship (the *Temeraire*), being towed away to be ignominiously scrapped by an ugly but functional new steam boat in the setting of a sunset, conjuring up the nostalgic remembrance of the passage of the era of British empire and naval supremacy. This is popularly considered the greatest painting in Britain and is iconic of the Victorian age of the great British Empire.

Q comments on the painting: “always makes me feel a bit melancholy. A grand old war ship, being ignominiously hauled away for scrap. The inevitability of time,

don’t you think?” Hare and sailing ship may be signifiers for the elderly M and middle-aged Bond, who are threatened with replacement by the new. Interestingly, Turner lived at 119 Cheyne Walk in London in the early 1800s as did Ian Fleming, Bond’s creator, in 1923–26.

Behind Bond and Q are another two paintings, Joseph Wright of Derby’s *Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768), which demonstrates the then cutting edge of science, an experiment with bird in an air pump, an appropriate backdrop for Q. The other is Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs William Hallett (The Morning Walk - 1785)* which depicts a wealthy couple in their marriage finery about to embark on life’s adventure with a dog looking adoringly at its mistress, a possible comparison of Bond and M or the Queen. These two actors are therefore cleverly framed by paintings that signify their characters.

In actual fact, the paintings in the museum are arranged somewhat differently and there is a couch, not a backless bench in the middle of the room, and this is not in front of the abovementioned paintings.

Bond is initially incredulous, disbelieving Q’s identity “because you still have spots [...] youth is no guarantee of innovation.” Q retorts that his

complexion is hardly relevant. [...] Age is no guarantee of efficiency. [...] I’ll hazard I can do more damage on my laptop sitting in my pyjamas before my first cup of Earl Grey than you can do in a year in the field.

However, he also concedes that agents like Bond are necessary since “every now and then a trigger has to be pulled.” Q provides him with tiny radio homing beacon and a pistol with a “micro sensor in the grip. It’s been coded to your palm print, so only you can fire it. Less of a random killing machine, more of a personal statement.” Bond remarks “a gun, and a radio. Not exactly Christmas, is it?” doubtless remembering the good old days when he was packed off to missions redolent with nifty contraptions, to which Q disparagingly alludes “were you expecting an exploding pen? We don’t really go in for that anymore.”

Bond despondently remarks “brave new world,” a comment with which we can readily sympathise when we later see Q engaging in the fray by using a laptop while drinking from a Scrabble (the board game) mug.

This does not prevent Bond from embarking on the customary and anticipated antics, such as action sequences on trains, driving a motorcycle over rooftops and so on. However, little is made of the two customary Bond girls, with the plot focusing instead on the com-

plex relationships between M and her secret agents. This evidenced by a word association test that Bond replies to in the following way: “Woman? Provocatrix. [...] M? Bitch.”

M’s leadership is also questioned by her superiors regarding her performance as well as the necessity for the continuation of MI6 itself. The confrontations commence with her meeting with the “new chairman, just standard procedure” which M dismisses as a “bloody waste of my time.” The “new Chairman of Intelligence and Security Committee” is Gareth Mallory (Ralph Fiennes) who apprises M:

I’m sorry to have to deal with such a delicate subject on our first encounter. But, M, I have to be frank with you. [...] The Prime Minister’s concerned. [...] Have you considered pulling out the agents [...]? Three months ago you lost a computer drive containing the identity of almost every NATO agent embedded in terrorist organization across the globe. A list, which in the eyes of our allies, never existed. So, if you’ll forgive me, I think you know why you’re here. [...] [W]e’re to call this ‘retirement planning.’ Your country has only the highest respect for you and your many years of service. When your current posting is completed, you’ll be awarded, GCMG with full honors. Congratulations. [...] I’m here to oversee the transition period leading to your voluntary retirement in two months time. Your successor has yet to be appointed, [...] you’ve had a great run. You should leave with dignity.

M obstinately retorts: “I’m not an idiot, Mallory. I knew I can’t do this job forever, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to leave the department in worse shape than I found it. [...] To hell with dignity. I’ll leave when the job’s done.”

Mallory later reconfronts M after another setback, noting that the British government

has taken the position we’re a bunch of antiquated bloody idiots fighting a war we don’t understand and can’t possibly win [...]. The Prime Minister’s ordered an inquiry. You’ll have to appear [...]. We’re a democracy and we’re accountable to the people we’re trying to defend. We can’t keep working in the shadows, there are no more shadows.

M ripostes

Oh, standing in the stock at midday. Who’s antiquated now? [...] You don’t get this, do you? Whoever’s behind this, whoever’s doing it, he knows us. He’s one of us. He comes from the same place as Bond. The place you say doesn’t exist. The shadows.

M’s reference to the shadows is apt as this is precisely what the villain turns out to be, a stateless person with the cybercapacity to strike from anywhere on the globe. Mallory also questions Bond’s suitability, pointing out to him that “it’s a young man’s game. [...] The only shame will be in not admitting it until it’s too late [...]. Good luck, 007. Don’t cock it up.” Bond feigns indifference: “hire me, or fire me. It’s entirely up to you” and is backed by M who declares “as long as I’m head of this department, I’ll choose my own operatives.”

M is vindicated by the actions of the villain (Raúl Silva reprised by Javier Bardem), a cyber-terrorist who is “able to breach the most secure computer system in Britain.” Silva is presented as Bond’s Jungian shadow, a former secret service agent who is physically and psychologically traumatised in the course of his duties, which he carries out with excessive zeal.

It is this that had led M to abandon him, thereby giving rise to the vendetta. M is unrepentant, avowing in general with regard to her treatment of the agents under her control: “what do you expect, a bloody apology? You know the rules of the game, you’ve been playing it long enough. We both have.” Silva therefore becomes a distorted reflection, Bond’s Jungian shadow, an authentic villain whose concealed facial disfiguration constitutes an “extreme physical grotesqueness,” which Kingsley Amis labelled “a sine qua non in Bond’s enemies” (Amis 64).

Bond confronts Silva on his island that is populated by henchmen and computer servers. Silva sneers at him

Just look at you, barely held together by your pills and your drink [...]. You’re still clinging to your faith in that old woman, when all she does is lie to you [...]. All that physical stuff is so dull. So dull. Chasing spies. So old-fashioned. England. The Empire. MI6. You’re living in a ruin, as well. You just don’t know it yet. At least here there are no old ladies giving orders, and no little gadgets from those fools in Q branch. If you wanted, you could pick your own secret missions, as I do. Hmm? Name it. Name it! Destabilize a multinational by manipulating stocks? Easy! Interrupt transmissions from a spy satellite over Kabul? Done! Rig an election in Uganda, all to the highest bidder. [...] Just point and click.

Bond responds “don’t forget my pathetic love of country” and admits that he has gone through a “resurrection.” Indeed Silva later grudgingly concedes “Not bad! Not bad, James, for a physical wreck.” He lets himself be caught by Bond but M still has to face a Parliamentary committee and is asked

So you believe the security of MI6 during the recent

crisis has been up to scratch? You'll forgive me for not putting up the bunting. I find it rather difficult to overlook the monumental security breaches and dead operatives for which you are almost single handedly responsible.

M staunchly defends her department and its rapidly metastasising problems.

Chairman, ministers. Today I've repeatedly heard how irrelevant my department has become. Why do we need agents, the double o section? Isn't it all rather quaint? Well, I suppose I see a different world than you do. And the truth is that what I see frightens me. I'm frightened because our enemies are no longer known to us. They do not exist on the map, they are not nations, they are individuals. Look around you, who do you fear? Can you see a face, a uniform, a flag? No. Our world is not more transparent now. It's more opaque. It's in the shadows. That's where we must do battle. So, before you declare us irrelevant, ask yourselves. How safe do you feel?

Once again, M points to the shadows as the threats, in lieu of the traditional enemies that were comprised of the Warsaw Pact countries. At this point, M quotes one of the most evocative poems that deals with age and the willingness to forge on, "Ulysses," by Tennyson, Britain's Victorian poet laureate.

Just one more thing to say. My late husband was a great lover of poetry. And um...I suppose some of it sunk in, despite my best intentions. And here today I remember this. I think, from Tennyson. 'We are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven. That which we are, we are. One equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'

This is just one of many British Bulldog moments that occur throughout the film. It is worth pointing out that "Ulysses" is quoted by Dame Judi Dench, an actual Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Furthermore, Tennyson's "Ulysses" is based on an alternate ending to the *Odyssey* by Dante wherein Ulysses never returns home to his kingdom of Ithaca but chooses to abandon his family and his duties. Tennyson's poem speculates about an elderly Ulysses' who yearns to sail away to seek new adventures and new knowledge.

Moreover the completion dates of Turner's painting of the Temeraire (1839) and Turner's "Ulysses" (1842) coincide with the period of the First Anglo-Chinese (Opium) War, with one of the outcomes including Britain's seizure of Hong Kong (Hao 6).

During the inquiry, Siva escapes, storms the hearing wherein M is interrogated and is stopped only by the timely intervention of Bond himself. Mallory also reveals himself to be a brave combatant in this firefight since he is a former SAS officer who was held captive by the IRA for three months.

At this juncture, Bond decides to escape with M, using her as bait to trap Silva. He decides to drive to the family manor in the Scottish Highlands using his original, iconic, silver 1965 Aston Martin DB5 which dates back from the *Goldfinger* film (Hamilton). The car features a six cylinder, 282-horsepower engine, reaching 60 miles per hour in 7.1 seconds, with a top speed of 148 mph. M notes sarcastically "I suppose that's completely inconspicuous."

Aston Martin is a classic English carmaker and Aston Martins have starred in eleven of the films to date. Again, the car dates Bond and further emphasises his Britishness by linking him with this classic marque. And when M complains "It's not really comfortable, is it?" Bond suggestively flips open the shift knob cap, which conceals the button for ejecting the passenger, seat, harking back to *Goldfinger*.

As they drive off to Scotland, Bond remarks that they are going "back in time. Somewhere we'll have the advantage." Bond, M and an old gamekeeper then prepare for Silva's attack in Bonds "beautiful old house" on a foggy King Arthurian moor. The entrance to the estate is flanked by the sculpture of a deer, which is strongly reminiscent of Edward Landseer's 1851 *Monarch of the Glen*.

Silva's assault includes a melodramatic entrance on a helicopter with blaring loud music (The Animals "Boom Boom") in a scene reminiscent of Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 *Apocalypse Now*, an American epic war film set during the Vietnam War. Like *Skyfall*, *Apocalypse Now* showcases a Jungian shadow, Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, a highly decorated US Army Special Forces officer who goes renegade, thereby depicting war as a potential Conradian *Heart of Darkness*. In *Apocalypse Now* Kurtz swoops in to attack by helicopter while loudly playing "The Ride of the Valkyries" (Die Walküre) by Richard Wagner.

In the ensuing struggle, the sky literally falls upon the old Scottish manor house, which is destroyed, and Silva loses all of his henchmen to Bond and his two allies. But Silva briefly captures M, holding her head next to his and pointing the gun at both of their heads in line with the muzzle, urging her to shoot, to "free both of us. Free both of us, with the same bullet. Do it! Do it! Only you

can do it. Do it.”

However, he is killed with a thrown knife by Bond, an adept use of one of “the old ways.” M unfortunately dies of bullet wounds and in her will, leaves Bond an ugly porcelain bulldog ornament decorated by a Union Jack that used to reside on her desk. This is given to Bond by a young agent, one of the Bond girls who used to be a field operative but who opts for a desk job, as “field work’s not for everyone,” leaving the older Bond as an active field agent. The operative reveals that her name is Money Penny, closing that particular loop in the Bond canon.

The setting for this scene is very British, the rooftop of the Department of Energy and Climate Change in Whitehall, offering spectacular views along Whitehall down to the Houses of Parliament.

In the final scene Bonds meets Mallory (who has become M) and who asks Bond “[a]re you ready to get back to work?” to which Bond replies “with pleasure, M. With pleasure.” The painting behind Mallory is also symbolic as it is Thomas Buttersworth’s, “The Battle of Trafalgar” showing the HMS *Victory* engaging the Franco-Spanish fleet in Battle of Trafalgar.

This is one of the most famous naval battles wherein Nelson used guile and unconventional tactics against great odds to lead his fleet to victory. Furthermore, the dying Nelson at Trafalgar asked the ship’s captain to kiss him, just as Bond kissed M as she died in his arms after being shot in the firefight with the Spanish *Silva*. Moreover, the *Temeraire* (featured in Turner’s painting) is seen here in its heyday, in action thirty years before the events in Turner’s painting, rejuvenated and in the thick of the action, during which it rescued the *Victory*, Nelson’s flagship, when it was attacked by several ships.

Other paintings are also cleverly showcased, including Amedeo Modigliani’s *La Femme a l’Eventail* (Woman With a Fan—1919), which was stolen from the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2010.

Discussion

Skyfall is replete with elements of the old Bond movies, instantly recognisable motifs such as Aston Martins, background music by John Barry and an action-packed screenplay. The symbolism implicit in classic English paintings and iconic British settings further accentuates Bond’s traditional Britishness.

The historical links to the canon are evident even in small and subtle details, such as the standard introduction to one of the Bond girls “Bond. James Bond” along a reference to a drink that is shaken but not stirred, as per Bond’s preference, to which he responds “perfect.”

This attention to detail includes Bond’s pale-blue swimming trunks which echo the pale-blue swimsuit that Sean Connery wore in Young’s *Thunderball* (1965).

The film also evokes a sense of a midlife crisis that Bond must face and overcome with the celebration of fifty years on the silver screen. “Bond’s decline is [...] a reflection on the decline of the British empire [...] Turkey [...] East Asia” (Hoa 3).

Skyfall depicts a new Bond who has grown up and matured beyond drink, drugs and cigarettes, a Bond who has come to terms with his human weaknesses and whose moodiness and resistance to authority is not sardonic cheek but the sign of a psychologically troubled soul. The narrative therefore crafts a new beginning that shuns Bond’s old psychopathic killer breezy amorality. This made him not only a celebration of the cold war struggle, but also a walking critique of an empire that turns a blind eye to caddish behaviour which leaves a trail of discarded women, corpses and assorted mayhem with impunity. Bond’s free association test affirms the notion when “murder” prompts the reply “employment.”

Arguably, the only mitigating factor that may permit MI6 and its operatives to continue to operate outside standard parameters as conventionally permitted by law is a shadowy terrorist threat that is ill-defined and ill-definable, and it is for this reason that MI6 has a mandate that must perforce be equally nebulous in order to allow this apparatus to successfully defend the polity with counter-terrorist measures that may break the law.

Skyfall is a new beginning, steering away from the initial postmodern tropes of decay and obsolescence, with even the new MI6 using “part of Churchill’s bunker. We’re still discovering tunnels dating back to the eighteenth century. Quite fascinating, if it wasn’t for the rats [...]” The location itself is redolent with memories of Britain with its back against the wall, under Nazi siege and threatened with invasion, “as if miming a certain geographical retreat; beaten back to its old borders, Britain is now hard pressed even to defend the metropole” (Hoa 3). These subthemes synergistically “affirm past grandeur and [...] imbue the present with the poignant heroism of an underdog resolved to fight to the death” (4).

There is also a sense of nostalgia for a rejuvenated and cleaner Bond who has become normalised, human and therefore flawed and fallible as he successfully negotiates the transition from the old to the new world, while threatened by novel enemies that operate from the shadows.

Our hero has also attained moral redemption at the expense of the villain. Redemption is a religious or

proto-religious conviction that refers to some sort of absolution after atonement for past transgressions, a common belief in many religions, a process that is also synonymous with salvation from eternal damnation in many cultures. This trope harks back to James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, who popularised this particular theme. Frazer noted the tale of the priesthood of Nemi wherein a king must be periodically slain by his rival as part of a fertility rite, redeeming his country. Through redemption, James has renounced his role as imperial fantasy and has become a real and believable person.

Even his Bond girls have matured, eschewing provocative names such as Pussy Galore, Honey Ryder, Holly Goodhead, Plenty O'Toole, Bambi, Thumper, Rosie Carver, Mary Goodnight, Octopussy and Jenny Flex. The days of easily available and scantily attired beauties have also passed.

Skyfall thus stands as an example of post-Jubilee and post-London-Olympic Bond, a blast from the past celebrating the former glories of mighty Empire through the Bond canon, which contrives to become "an example of British fortitude" by teaching Bond, an "old dog, new tricks."

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