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From Bringland With Love: National Identity and James Bond

“Bond knew that there was something alien and un-English about himself. He knew that he was a difficult man to cover up. Particularly in England. He shrugged his shoulders. Abroad was what mattered”. (Fleming, 1955, p. 40).

Claiming to be British in the twenty-first century can be both confusing and contentious. I am English, I am British and I'm also from the United Kingdom. Some of my colleagues also fall into the latter two categories, hailing from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Many find that the term Britishness denies them a sense of national identity as they believe that when one talks of being British, what is really being suggested, is that they are referring to “being English”. Pinning down Englishness is in itself a very difficult task. For many, Englishness is interchangeable with Britishness, leaving little distinction for Welsh, Irish or Scottish aspects of the United Kingdom. Indeed, while Fleming's own preference for the cinematic Bond was Cary Grant, the very image of the English gentlemen, the role went to a Scot.

As Lewis Smith highlighted in a recent article in The Times newspaper “Fleming's first choice was Cary Grant... Others on Fleming's 1961 list of actors with the right faces were David Niven, James Mason, Patrick McGoohan, Rex Harrison, Richard Burton and Stewart Grainger... Connery failed to make the list and Fleming had serious misgivings about him...” (The Times, March 6th 2007 p. 5). Of the six actors mentioned, four were English (Burton being Welsh and McGoohan an Irish raised American). However, as suggested in Fleming's novel *Moonraker*, the character of Bond never quite felt completely English. This may have as much to do with the violence of his profession and the devious nature of spying, than in any real suggestion that he was not in fact of English stock. On reassessing Connery's performance after *Dr. No* (1962), however, Fleming finally accepted the actor to such a degree that in two novels written subsequent to the first James Bond movie, the author made James Bond's father a Scot. We also learn in the novels that after being expelled from Eton, Bond is finally educated at Fettes College in Scotland. Fleming further distances Bond from pure English stock by having his mother born in Switzerland. As I shall discuss later, the various cinematic incarnations of Bond further complicate notions of James Bond as English hero.

According to Jeffrey Richards notions of Britishness since the eighteenth century have been “strongly shaped and influenced” (Richards, 1997, p.26) more by a sense of Englishness rather than an amalgam of Scots, Irish and Welsh. He continues to suggest that “An examination of the changing face of the English/British dominant

image is followed by an examination of Scottish, Welsh, Irish... cinematic images, which underline the ethnic and cultural diversity of Britain” (Richards, 1997, p.26). In constructing identity against the dominant image of Englishness any sense of a uniform British identity is always embedded with an historical and often nostalgic sense of Englishness.

On considering Stuart Hall’s view that the term Britishness needed to be redefined, Saeed, Blain and Forbes suggest that the term Britishness “has become increasingly problematic” (Saeed et al 1999 p. 822) and further claim that, for Scotland at least, Britishness has never been used comfortably with the Scots due to its link with Englishness. They go on to argue that Welshness too has become more distinct from a wider arcing sense of Britishness. With its own language television channel (S4C) and formation of a Welsh Assembly, Wales has, for the last twenty years sought to create a Welsh identity separate from the English/British one. Scotland too has also further tried to divorce itself not only from English/British culture, but also English/British politics.

Britishness it would appear has become a redundant, if not, unsavoury term for many non English native members of the United Kingdom. In fact a more useful set of terms would be “Bringlish” and “Bringland” in that when we talk about Britishness what we’re usually suggesting is a sense of England and Englishness. Of course this again may prove a reductive method of approaching the complexities of national identity, but in a discussion of the figure of James Bond in the movie series at least, I believe them to be very useful.

It seems wholly appropriate that the ‘legitimate front’ for 007’s Secret Intelligence Service is called Universal Export. James Bond, certainly in his cinematic incarnation exports the ‘Bringlish’ national identity across the globe. It’s estimated that over half the world’s population have seen at least one James Bond movie and has one of the most recognisable signature tunes in movie history. Such is the success of this British film industry export that it’s arguable that you don’t even have had to have seen a James Bond movie to get a sense of who the character is and what he represents. With each actor cast in the part a whole new set of identifiers, or what Bennett and Woollacott refer to as, “mobile signifiers” (Bennett and Woolacott 1987, p.42) are brought to the fore in a discussion of national identity.

Part of the enjoyment of the Bond movies is seeing the various exotic locations within each film. Some critics have argued that the later films were simply glorified travelogues that did nothing to develop the plot and were there on a purely aesthetic level. I would argue that rather than simply being eye candy, the rapid and easy

country-hopping within each film underpins the idea that Bond is still the post-Imperial hero who has access to the rest of the world. This is the spirit of the British Empire and while Bond himself doesn't wish to colonise, he does send a strong message around the world that the Bringlish are still there and ready to solve the problems of their arrant children of the Empire.

Internationally recognised fictional English heroes are very few and far between. While it's arguable that Robin Hood is one of the first, his journey has been one from an historical fact to fictional romanticism and it's not until the arrival of Conan Doyle's purely fictional creation, Sherlock Holmes, do we see the selling of heroism and the hero as a commodity. Indeed I will argue that it is from the nineteenth century onwards, where heroes and heroism become something to be marketed and sold, not only to the British people but also to the rest of the world. The likes of Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Doctor Who and indeed Harry Potter are not factual heroes made legend over time, but fictional creations that have embedded themselves into the psyche of a nation and have lined the pockets of the publishers and producers.

These heroes are not simply products that have a resonance financially. They also reflect their time of production and their continued success points to something much deeper in terms of their relationship to the audience. Indeed there appears to be a reversal of the factual historical figure becoming a mythical fiction (as in King Arthur and Robin Hood), whereby Sherlock Holmes transcends the text of the original novels – letters are received to 221b Baker Street everyday, addressed to the great detective and James Bond has become a byword for spies and playboys throughout the world.

It was not until the late 1950s that another fictional character appears to represent heroic England (and Britain) throughout the world. Of course this is the literary incarnation of Ian Fleming's James Bond and while it would be the cinematic version of 007 that would capture the imagination of an international audience, we cannot ignore the success of the novels to secure the image of James Bond in people's minds.

In recent years only Harry Potter appears to represent English heroism and has achieved success on a global scale. His magical powers tend to align him specifically with Arthurian legend and a mythology of a different, pre-Christian England rather than a post-Imperial or even post-war Britain. J.K. Rowling's books have rekindled an interest in reading amongst children and adults alike and it's

arguable that the success of the Potter series has led to the success of the “Young James Bond” series written by Charlie Higson, now on to its third title.

There has been a further resurgence of interest in the English hero with the resurrection of the hugely successful science fiction series Doctor Who. While Bond’s own identity crisis in the novel *Casino Royale* is highlighted by 007 feeling “alien and un-English” the hero in Doctor Who hero may speak with an English accent (in fact the current actor playing the Doctor, David Tennant, has masked his own Scottish brogue in favour of English ‘Mockney’), but the character is in fact an alien.

This paper contends that analysing the many faces of the cinematic James Bond helps to highlight the complexities surrounding an understanding of Englishness or more broadly Britishness. Also, with each new actor taking on the role of 007, we also see the rearticulation of English heroism and indeed masculinity and while this rearticulation may not be extreme, each new actor brings with him the opportunity for the audience to reread both a sense of Englishness, heroism and masculinity.

While Bennett and Woollacott in *Bond and Beyond* (1987) analysed the moments of Bond within a political framework, or analysed how the novels of Ian Fleming transformed into the movies that bore little resemblance to their literary origins save the title, little work has been carried out to examine the recycling of the British hero and how this is inflected in the role of James Bond. Indeed one gets the sense that the movies serve to lock the hero in, contain him within the confines of formulaic narrative structure.

We each have a favourite actor whom we believe accomplished something in playing a particular popular character – whether it be Basil Rathbone as the definitive Sherlock Holmes or Tom Baker as the definitive Doctor Who. What is it that they accomplish, stuck as they are in a formula and character structure? What do they offer and what are they representing? While each new actor coming to the role allows the fictional character to live on, he also imbues that character with a new vitality, where the hero remains ever young in the casting of fresh talent. It also serves to reignite our interest in that character, fuelling debates around casting and the potential reinterpretation of the role. The changing actors can also serve to observe shifts in an understanding of national identity.

Of course all these actors are bound to a great degree by scripts, direction and marketing of their image, but they each bring with them an image and a character of their own. Behind the tuxedo, the gun, the sports car and a bevy of beautiful women

the actor is still present, we cannot simply sweep their contribution under the carpet, whether we find their own performances wooden, camp or overly dramatic.

The assumption of a fixed fictional character such as James Bond is that while the actor changes (through reasons of age or box office appeal for example) the basic characteristics and function of that hero remain. As with the formula, there are key aspects to the character that cannot change. While I am not contesting this, I do believe that if formula and character traits must remain the constant, an analysis of these areas soon becomes staid – what else is there left to say if these functions have been revealed? What interests me is the way in which, as I mentioned earlier, each actor brings with him a redefinition of this constant, revealing rather than concealing different aspects of Britishness and indeed heroism. There is a process whereby the characteristics of the hero and national identity are reassigned and reinvested. These are formed by the actor's own traits and personality that exist outside the parameters of a tight formula that dictates general aspects of the character James Bond. He has to be a 007 operative with his licence to kill. He has to be a heterosexual male (and arguably a white male). There are many other aspects that remain constant in any portrayal of Bond, but these are dictated by script rather than performance. Of course, whatever each actor brings to this process, the performance and the character are also bound by changing attitudes of heroism – although are they constructing new images of the British hero, or simply rearticulating established ones?

While there has been a concerted effort to examine the significance of casting in the Bond movies, for example Bennett and Woollacott draw on John Ellis' work on stars and how cinema stars "are composed of snatches and fragments, miscellaneous chunks of 'real life' and different and sometimes contradictory narrative identities which do not add up to a coherent or rounded whole" (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987, p. 271). Here they reach an impasse and conclude that Sean Connery and Roger Moore (while ignoring Lazenby) can never really be constructed as star on an equal level to that of the character, which they see as the dominant factor. I disagree and would suggest that the actors are integral to the way in which we accept and identify with the fictional character. Testament to this is the predilection of movie and news websites to ask in online polls, not what the favourite Bond film is, but rather which actor was the best Bond.

Of course to a great degree this is true, as typecasting bears out, but as with other fictional characters such as the aforementioned Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Who, where undeniably the character is bigger and more durable than the actor, it is too reductive to view these actors, in 'snatches and fragments' perhaps, and deny them the fact that they do bring something to the role and indeed, are integral in the negotiating of national identity within the movies.

The Many Faces of Bond and Bringlishness

Bennett and Woollacott refer to the political moments of Bond as “mobile signifiers” (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987, p.42,) and this is a useful term not only for analysing the fictional character but also the actors who have played the role. On the surface they are the same character, the same constant hero but each offers a different version of Bringlishness. However, when a Bond movie does falter at the box office, the focus of blame is invariably on an alteration to the formula and on the actor behind the tuxedo. This was certainly the case for George Lazenby in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* and Timothy Dalton in *Licence To Kill*. Interestingly there is very little written on either Lazenby or Dalton, who between them only made three appearances in the series, as if their respective failures at the box office appear as exceptions that prove the rule.

Looking at the nationality of the actors who have played Bond, it reads like the politically incorrect “Englishman, Irishman and Scotsman” jokes so popular in Britain before the advent of political correctness. This seems a somewhat appropriate analogy for a film series that is often cited as a parody of the spy genre and for a hero who has failed to embrace political correctness in all its forms.

While our suspension of disbelief may be excused on the suggestions of invisible cars and men with golden guns, isn't it too much to ignore the fact that Connery spoke with a Scottish accent? Are we to simply pretend that he is playing an English hero? While Connery would go on to play Scots Russians, Scots Irish and Scots Spanish (in *The Hunt For Red October*, *The Untouchables* and *Highlander* respectively), his performance as Bond does extend the nationality of Bond to at least Britishness and arguably his accent became the internationally recognised voice of the English spy. As mentioned earlier, Fleming was not happy that Connery had been cast, commenting that he didn't like the face, the accent or the hair. Jeffrey Richards suggests that “For many foreigners the terms British and English are interchangeable” (Richards, 1997, p. 3) and having recently watched two James Bond films in Germany (*Dr. No* and *Live and Let Die*) where the dubbing of Sean Connery and Roger Moore rendered 007 as a neutral version of Britishness, it is easy to understand why. However, for an audience familiar with the differences in accent, Connery's enunciation further distances the audience from any 'pure' sense of Englishness and we become aware of Englishness as a complex construction, now made up of English and Scots.

Furthermore Richards proposes that Bond is essentially classless and that Connery's accent distracts "him from the upper-class English gentlemen who customarily played secret agents" (Richards, 1997, p. 164). This is too reductive. Class does play a part. He is obviously not working class and is often seen surrounded by expensive gadgets, fast cars and glamorous women and locations. While he is never seen paying for any of these and from time to time has to return the equipment, he does operate in a high class world and he isn't simply performing a better class than he is. His background is not one that rings true of a working class upbringing (Eton and Fettes). He is also seen discussing the finer things in life and constantly advises his superiors and contemporaries on the art of better living, as in *From Russia With Love* and *Diamonds Are Forever*. Jeremy Black in *The Politics of James Bond* suggests that Bond "... exudes a "class" apparently quite unconnected with money or birth". (Black, 2000, p. 211). So while Bond may not represent one particular class over another he does not stand outside of the class system in that he transcends it, rather he ignores the boundaries of class in as much as he ignores the geographical barriers in his pursuit of villainy.

The casting of the Australian George Lazenby further acts to distance the audience from Englishness. His accent was deemed so un-English that for entire sections of the film he was to be dubbed by English actor George Baker, when Bond had to impersonate the very English Hilary Bray. As Lazenby points out in the opening sequence of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, "this never happened to the other fella". Not only does he lose his voice, but he loses the girl (both in the opening and closing sequences of the film, when Tracy escapes in his car and is at the film's conclusion, shot dead by Blofeld). Psychoanalysis would have us believe that on both occasions Bond is effectively being rendered impotent. The emphasis on ancestry in *OHMSS* is interesting – Blofeld wants to be accepted under a family name and Bond too is desperately trying to remain forever English but is obviously not. Yet again we see 007 as "alien and un-English" and Lazenby was fiercely rejected at the box office. Not until the casting of Daniel Craig, would audiences be split on such a casting decision.

It isn't until 1973 that we first see an Englishman appear in the role of James Bond in the official series of films. His Englishness is pushed to the point of parody. Often the marker for how the world perceives Englishness. His 007 is very much the Englishman abroad who doesn't quite make himself blend in with the scenery – compare Connery's duck camouflage in *Goldfinger* to the rather dated and oft-mocked safari suit in Moore's *Octopussy*. The scenes of Bond racing through Indian streets would be construed as offensive if it were not so embarrassing. James Bond in this instance is out of time and place. He no longer blends in and seems to think the days of the British Raj are still enjoying their heyday.

Moore's performance and characterisation was too English. Rather than provide a nostalgic view of the English hero, this 007 was pure caricature. There was no veneer to scratch and Moore's Bond was patently not a version of Englishness that anyone could ever believed existed. His was a 007 of pure escapist fantasy – the quintessential Englishman and James Bond in the cinema was in danger of becoming an anachronism. Certainly by the time of *Goldeneye*'s release in 1995, things needed to be shaken, if not stirred up and as the female M remarks, Bond has become "A dinosaur. A relic of the cold war". Roger Moore was more in keeping with the English action hero of 1960s fantasy television, from Moore's own tenure as Simon Templar in *The Saint* through to Patrick Macnee foppish portrayal as John Steed in *The Avengers*. Unsurprisingly, in Moore's final Bond film *A View To A Kill*, the producers saw fit to bring the two icons of British television together. Already an established English hero through his appearance in the television series, *The Saint*, Roger Moore offered a comedic version of the Connery template, where the audience are invited in on the joke that has become the English hero; This is where James Bond is reduced to laughable post Imperial Englishness, whereby male dominance had to be both reaffirmed and undermined at the same time, as Tony Bennett argues in his article 'James Bond and Popular Culture', "the films are experienced as a joyful send-up of redundant ideological categories" (Bennett, 1982, p. 30). As Moore got older and more visually and physically impotent, to the point where stuntmen had to double for the actor running up the Eiffel Tower staircase, the parody grew.

The Welsh actor, Timothy Dalton further muddied the water in terms of Englishness when he approached the role in 1987 with *The Living Daylights*. In an attempt to move away from self mockery and re-establish a serious, hard and heroic masculinity, Dalton brought to the role an intensity and sombreness that pushed the figure of Bond as a role to almost non-recognition. Certainly his performance was seen to be too sombre and audiences felt that some of the jokiness inherent during Moore's time should have made its way to Dalton. By the time of his second film *Licence To Kill* in 1989, not only had producers attempted to restructure the formula (Bond leaves the secret service and is considered a renegade agent), Dalton too had reworked the character to incorporate a sadistic edge which, while alluding to the literary Bond, was a long way from its cinematic counterpart. With the exception of character names and the routine "Bond, James Bond" (delivered abruptly, almost apologetically) there is very little Bond here that had been seen in the previous three incarnations.

Perhaps the most internationally established actor prior to becoming James Bond was Pierce Brosnan. Like Roger Moore, Brosnan had had a successful presence on television, in Brosnan's case with *Remington Steele*. His face and manner were already imprinted on the public consciousness, particularly in the United States. Brosnan developed what Dalton and indeed Lazenby offered in the opening up of the British hero. Brosnan is an Irish born actor and was already a bankable star internationally. His portrayal of Bond manages to encapsulate a version of Englishness acceptable to a much wider audience. If we look at Brosnan's role in the comedy *Mrs. Doubtfire*, we see the bumbling all too smooth Englishman that isn't a million miles from Roger Moore's take on James Bond. This was Bringlish for an American market. While only making four films in the Bond series, Brosnan has already become one of the most popular versions of James Bond, in terms of his placing on favourite 007 polls.

The latest actor to don the tuxedo, Daniel Craig is only the second English actor to play 007 in the official series. Craig had made his name in the BBC series *Our Friends in the North*. His performance in that series puts him at the other end of the spectrum as far as Moore's portrayals of southern Englishness are concerned. On news that Craig had been cast as 007, there was an backlash from fans and tabloid newspapers, who referred to the actor as "James Bland" and "James Blond". Craig seemed to be everything 007 shouldn't be. He was blond and Northern. As in the first season of the new series of *Doctor Who*, where northern actor Christopher Eccleston was cast as the eponymous hero, reference is made to the Doctor's northern accent. He replies, "lots of planets have a north", eventually there began a new acceptance that Englishness could encapsulate other regions within England and that heroes did not have to speak BBC English.

On several levels *Casino Royale* is a rewriting (or rebooting) of the franchise and of the hero, Craig's Bond is one that is wracked with uncertainty at the start of the film. He is finding his place in the world. As he comments to M, "you want me to be part hit man, part monk". The audience too are knocked off kilter, when the traditional Bond motifs are either subverted or don't appear in their usual order. The pre-title sequence does not begin with the gun barrel (this comes four minutes into the film and is embedded within the actual narrative; the James Bond theme doesn't appear until the end of the film, neither does the famous "Bond, James Bond" and when asked if he'd like his martini shaken not stirred, he replies "do I look like I give a damn?". *Casino Royale* lacks that tongue in cheek approach that typified the Moore films or the celebratory feel of Brosnan's final movie, *Die Another Day*. The use of the black and white prologue also takes Bond back to an imaginary cinematic past that wishes to evoke the novels as opposed to the early Connery pictures (with the

exception of 007 walking out of the water, thus again subverting the classic image of Ursula Andress in *Dr. No* and later Halle Berry in *Die Another Day*).

In *Casino Royale*, Craig plays Bond as a man unsure of his emotions. The 007 of *Casino Royale* is being rebuilt in front of us. We see him fall in love but quickly come to resent women (who are seen as betrayers of men in this film). Perhaps this is the closest Bond has gotten to being English in that he learns to keep his emotions in check and as M suggests, learns to “keep his ego out of the equation”. He has to learn to kill and he has to learn that loving, rather than using a woman, can seriously damage your health. Attitudes towards death and love in *Casino Royale* are that they have to be detached from the hero. In the opening sequence Bond is made to work for his first kill (although this actually turns out to be his second kill and it’s the first that becomes “surprisingly” easy). As the MI6 traitor remarks of the supposed first kill, “made you feel it did he?” In a surprisingly violent fight scene, for a Bond film at least, we are shown for the first time that killing someone isn’t that easy or indeed flippant (as earlier Bond films would have us believe). Soon 007 learns to become dispassionate about killing on behalf of his organisation and similarly, the refrain that “bitch is dead”, referring to Vesper at the end of the film, makes Bond a cold and professional spy and harks back to Fleming's first 007 novel.

In all his guises Bond is sold to the rest of the world as a perfect version of Englishness. It isn’t a clear cut well defined nationality and for many Englishness itself is a thing of the past, a museum piece to be remembered with false nostalgia. Englishness has aspects of quaintness that seem ill fitting to the figure of masculine hero. Englishness suggests foppishness and is perhaps too genteel, whereas Bringlishness can draw on aspects of national identity from four countries – England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Like a Post-Imperial England, James Bond desperately clings on to the old ways, of political, social and economic dominance where Englishness could infiltrate every aspect of life. Only through fiction can this be done to any great success and through the cinematic Bond, Englishness can be repackaged and sold to the rest of the world. As the world changes and as England’s standing within the world changes so too must its heroes. Some fall by the wayside while others are updated to reflect the age that they are being re-presented to the audience. The BBC’s recent re-imagining of Robin Hood certainly seems to reflect a post-Iraq concern and features troubled and disillusioned youth in the guise of Robin. So too, the producers of the latest Bond film chose to film the original novel (first filmed in 1967 as a comedy with David Niven), arguably the most cynical of all of Fleming’s books, where Craig’s Bond is portrayed simply as a man with a job to do and where the action adventurer gunning his way around an exotic world seems a far cry from the likes of Connery, Lazenby, Moore, Dalton and Brosnan.

Through the James Bond films Englishness is constructed. Bond may live to die another day and as Kamal Khan notes in *Octopussy*, 007 has “a nasty habit of surviving”, as do wistful remnants of Englishness, in a decidedly lost and fading Empire. The English may not exist in any real sense, but Bond succeeds as a hero because he provides an escapist fantasy that evokes a sense of an England and Englishness as concepts to be proud of. He is a relic of an English people that never was in an England that came to be created by J.B. Priestley novels, Noel Coward songs and Hugh Grant romantic comedies. 007 is a fragmented character, made up of different national identities (due in no small part to the actors of varied nationalities acting out ‘Englishness’) that falsely come together to suggest the archetypal English hero. He is however a caricature of what an English hero should be, rather than one that ever was, who was created by Fleming at a time when the British/English Empire was rapidly crumbling around him. For the cinema, the figure of Bond and the false epitomes of Englishness have proven to be financially lucrative and James Bond has since become an image of the English made for the rest of the world. Englishness is a fiction made up of many nostalgic memories. The James Bond franchise skilfully taps into this market of nostalgia, but even it wrestles with the ideas of what is English. One thing is sure - Bond will return, but this constructed Englishness may not.

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Filmography

A View To A Kill (1985)

Casino Royale (1967)

Casino Royale (2006)

Diamonds Are Forever (1971)

Die Another Day (2002)

Dr. No (1962)

From Russia With Love (1963)

Goldeneye (1995)

Goldfinger (1964)

Highlander (1986)

Licence To Kill (1989)

Live and Let Die (1973)

Mrs. Doubtfire (1993)

Octopussy (1983)

On Her Majesty's Secret Service (1969)

The Hunt For Red October (1990)

The Living Daylights (1987)

The Untouchables (1987)

Television

The Avengers (1961-69)

Doctor Who (1963-89, 1996, 2004-)

Our Friends in the North (1996)

Remington Steele (1982-87)

The Saint (1962-69)

