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Jeremy Packer (Ed.): Secret Agents. Popular Icons Beyond James Bond

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Jeremy Packer (Ed.): Secret Agents. Popular Icons Beyond James Bond

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My name is Bassett, Drew Bassett. Any introduction which starts with this sentence structure immediately references the iconic secret agent James Bond and pays tribute to the character's brand strength. I'm not sure exactly what contemporary audiences make of Bond but some of the most pleasurable movie moments of my film-going life have been Bond moments: the jet pack landing in *Goldfinger* (1964) or the union jack parachute deployment in the pre-film credit sequence in *The Spy who Loved me* (1977).

In 1987 Janet Woollacott and Tony Bennett published *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* in which the hero's popularity was attributed to the plasticity of Bond as a mobile signifier. This seminal text rethought the employment of Marxist, psychoanalytic and semiotic theory in cultural criticism to look beyond explaining James Bond's political agency and power as simply a 'text' to be read, its ideology(ies) to be exposed. This new volume of essays titled *Secret Agents: Popular Icons Beyond James Bond* as edited by Jeremy Packer provides a necessary analysis of the changing cultural representations of the secret agent: Jack Bauer in *24*, Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), as well as Bond. The Secret Agent is "approached as an ever-changing and mutating cultural formation." (S.3) The book addresses a number of thematic 'beyonds': the first section considers why secret agents never seem to die and remain popular, beyond the grave. The second section looks to the discourse of origins and historical formulations beholden to the Cold War, beyond history, and the final section suggests we must look beyond the box in the way the Secret Agent has infiltrated the world of convergent cultures, where video games or reality shows maybe more important than movie premieres to how secret agency is experienced.

If you choose to accept this mission, you will have to keep in mind that with any volume of this type some essays are more interesting than others. Some essays are more comprehensible than others since the existence of double or even triple agents is a possibility – certain male authors are suspected feminists. You should burn after reading as some chapters are not so easily digested and you may want to destroy the evidence. As is often the case, there are no photos for obvious security reasons.

Kevin J. Hagopian looks at the way parodies of the Bond films, most notably Dean Martin as Matt Helm in *The Silencers* (1966), *Murderers' Row* (1966), *The Ambushers* (1967), *The Wrecking Crew* (1969), James Coburn as Derek Flint in *Our Man Flint* (1965) and *In Like Flint* (1967), and of course more recently Mike Myers as Austin Powers in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997), *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999), *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002), fashioned a more secure position for the Bond films as the ultimate

conveyor of Bond's modernist, consumerist value. "By parodying that in which a considerable element of self-parody already inhered [...] the Bond parodies helped to fix the Bond ideal as a stable cultural presence." (S.23) The parodies interrogate the ideology of Bond, while supporting Bond in the market place. Yet, there are curious differences from the Bond films themselves. Austin Powers and Derek Flint seem to be unable to control their sexual appetites whereas Bond uses sex as a work tool (so to speak) to extract information. His sexual profligacy has been misidentified with the swinging sixties through the Austin Powers character. Bond's materialism, the cars, boats and apartments are also only the means to an end (stopping world domination by an egomaniac with a cat fetish). Bond himself is quite austere.

Bennett and Woollacott saw James Bond as a hero of modernisation, like the original mods who tried to outclass elites through cosmopolitan style and technology. Christine Feldman analyses Bond's position of being caught between a more conservative consumer culture and a youth culture with a more utopian aspect a little more closely and according to her, "the Modness of mid-sixties style presented in the *Austin Powers* trilogy offers audiences a respite (from the "war on terror") through its satirical, yet rose-coloured view of the recent past." (S.71)

Matthew Jordan comments on the trend for spies to be children and/or children in families of spies. He notes that the plot resolutions in the *Spy Kids* films often depend upon "reversing the older cultural order and having a fully integrated world of children and adults." (S.83) The restoration of harmony can only happen once the children and adults come together as part of a kid-oriented goal. (S.86) This panders to the children who will become the next generation of consumers and communicates the message that bad parents are those which restrict consumer choice.

The chapter I was most interested in reading is titled "Post feminism Galore: The Bond Girl as Weapon of Mass Consumption" by Jeremy Packer and Sarah Sharma, and it is very rewarding. Bond girls are always framed by the question of how feminist they are. The film's producers and the actresses invariably reply that she is more feminist than the previous Bond girls and/or is re-read as an "always-already feminist for her times, not so much as an active agent or representation in women's struggle but a 'reflection' of a generalised women's movement." (S.108) The discourse of feminism is used to market the girls. Bond girl feminism becomes a brand by which itself becomes a means of generating profit. Commodity feminism refers to women's empowerment articulated as economic independence from men i.e. you are emancipated because you can buy whatever you like. The Bond girls contribute to this false consciousness.

Miranda J. Brady's analysis of *Alias* (2001-2006) shows it to have a nasty little ideological agenda. You could say it also has a pussy fetish. Female CIA spy Sydney Bristow, whose parents are also spies, flits heavily disguised from one exotic location to another. Her relentless patriotism and familial loyalty are contrasted

repeatedly with the shifty, morally degraded, less family-oriented, hyper sexual foreign *femmes* with dodgy accents and dusky skin tones. The series was made by ABC, which is owned by Disney, and given the seal of approval by the CIA. "Alias's emergence in the fear-ridden post-9/11 era plays on social anxieties over invasion, foreignness and technology" (S.126). Its message is that only morally virtuous behaviour will create good citizens who can realise the American dream.

According to Jack Z. Braitich (with a name like that he could be Jack Bauer's evil doppelgänger), we are all spies. His chapter "Spies like Us" is, in fact, very chilling. As I was reading it, I felt myself to be like the traditional spy who after breaking into the heavily fortified headquarters of a lunatic billionaire, discovers evidence that this deranged psychopath has access to a deadly virus and intends to deploy it in order to destroy civilisation as we know it. Braitich's thesis is simple: the popularisation on TV of spying and spying techniques intertwined with normal and family life, emphasises the immanence of spying and makes spies of us all. *Alias* and *24* (and films *The Good Shepherd* 2006, *Mr and Mrs Smith* 2005 and the *Spy Kids* films) integrate family life with secret agency. Reality shows such as *Exposed* (which uses lie detection software), *Room Raiders* (which involves searching people's rooms), *Cheaters* (which gathers proof by surveillance that someone is being unfaithful to their partner), *Gay, Straight or Taken* (title says it all) all rely on deception-detection. Braitich believes, with regards to the post-9/11 world, that these aspects of popular culture are conditioning us to be agents for the state. Ironically, this mindset of distrust can also be directed against the state itself (Barack Obama isn't even American, right?).

There is an eclectic and not always coherent mix in the final essay that I can't even hope to summarise let alone analyse. I simply leave you with its title, "Statecraft, Spycraft and Spacecraft: The Political Career (and Craft) of a Popular Hero in Outer Space". Foucault is mentioned so I'm sure you will sympathise with me.

So there you are. An interesting and thought-provoking collection of essays which fulfils the remit of its title by going way beyond the cultural significance of James Bond.

Drew Bassett (Köln)