James Bond versus Big Data Surveillance in the Age of Terror

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The latest James Bond flick, Spectre, is quite frankly, an affront to the intellect and leaves the viewer completely cold, neither shaken nor stirred on the emotional level. Even the action scenes are poorly choreographed and tedious to watch because they are gratuitously grafted on to a plot so thin, it is practically anorexic. Plagued by wooden acting, the film is choc-bloc-full of every hackneyed cliché of the espionage genre but worst of all, there is zero sexual tension between the middle-aged hero and his latest lady love who is too young, insipid and flat to make a credible love interest for the hardened assassin even though her drink of choice is a dirty martini. Even more incredible is her totally implausible shift from independent fly girl who wants nothing to do with the womanizing MI6 agent to a stereotypical damsel in distress, the Bond girl who needs rescuing and realizes after nearly being killed that first and foremost on her bucket list is a sexual liaison with a man closer to her father's age than her own.

In sum: it is a pretty rubbish film and a scandalous squandering of US$250 million dollars, the obscene cost of making this bloated blockbuster. Lasting almost three long, boring hours, I found myself composing my To Do list in my head and wishing I was at home, scrubbing my bathtub instead. But despite all of the above, James Bond films, the franchise spawned by Ian Fleming's novels that I so loved as a kid, are an important cultural text. The Bond film genre has always been a barometer indexing the West's fears and anxieties. Watching them over the last half century, we can track the West's perceived enemies from state-backed actors to shadowy underworld criminals. But why has 007 never taken on Islamist militants?

During the Cold War, Mr. Bond often fought the KGB when the communist Soviet Union was opposed to the capitalist West. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, James Bond seemed in search of a solid villain but the franchise, stuck in a time warp, kept revisiting Russian-inspired themes throughout the 1990s. Up until 2002 with Die Another Day, communism remained the enemy but of the North Korean variety. Since the Bond brand was relaunched in 2006 with Casino Royale, environmental and economic themes have become more prominent,

thus villains are no longer (former) KGB agents but evil men who manipulate global systems to realize their own dastardly desires.

However, while Bond is a cultural text that teaches the West who it is at war with, it also does just as much to obfuscate some of the real wars the West is fighting. In a post-9/11 world, how odd it is that the jetsetting 007 never continent hops all the way to Iraq, Syria, Pakistan or Afghanistan. We are yet to see a fully-fledged Islamist militant group like ISIS or al-Qaeda blown to smithereens by the debonair Mr. Bond whose dry witticisms are just as fast-flowing as his bullets. The West's greatest economic adversary is similarly notably absent. Although there is mounting fear that China's economic rise will weaken western geopolitical dominance, China has not yet become the MI6 agent's nemesis. In fact, in 1997's Tomorrow Never Dies, war between Britain and China is averted by the intrepid spy. Even though Vladimir Putin is persona non grata amongst Western powers because of his support of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, his granting of asylum to Edward Snowden, his incursions into Ukraine and Georgia and not to mention his bizarre penchant for having himself photographed shirtless in various macho poses fighting bears etc., the Russians have not resumed their position of Enemy Numero Uno in the latest Bond film. Instead, something quite intriguing happens in Spectre. There is a new archenemy.

Ian Fleming was very clever when he created the Bond series. As early as 1959, he feared that Bond would become irrelevant if the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union no longer posed an existential threat to the West which feared the dropping of atomic bombs if the war heated up. Thus, he created SPECTRE which stands for the Special Executive for Counter-intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion, a group of evildoers who have been dogging 007 since the 1960s. SPECTRE is a versatile, malleable villain, taking on different dimensions at different historical moments but intriguingly, in the 2010s, this group comes to represent not radical Islamist jihadis but instead, what turns out to be haunting the western psyche in this latest Bond film is the West itself. The West turns out be its own worst enemy.

In the overwrought yet flimsy plotline, the new villain on the block is not the head of SPECTRE, Ernst Stavro Blofeld aka Franz Oberhauser who tortures and almost kills Bond and who is revealed as the mastermind responsible for all the wickedness Bond has faced down in the last three films. Blofeld is the same old, same old enemy of the last fifty-plus years. Instead, the real evil-doer is the British government personified by the character C who is trying to eradicate the good old-fashioned agent in the field MI6 program by replacing it with the more "efficient" tactic of big data surveillance. C is all about modern technology, drone strikes, and the world's governments sharing their tsunami amounts of undemocratically-collected data yielded by unknowing cell phone and internet users. He advocates for a program called "Nine Eyes" which is a version of the real-life "Five Eyes" program in which the UK's GCHQ partners with the US's NSA to monitor the inter webs and find out everything we're doing all the time, at least in the five countries of the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Thus, the Bond franchise is attempting to respond to the post-Edward Snowden world.

But while Bond has never (or not yet) come face to face with Islamist militants, reacting to the post-Snowden world is in fact a belated attempt to respond, finally, to 9/11 because what the Snowden revelations of 2013 reveal more than anything else is the extent to which "national security" concerns have strangled civil liberties such as privacy. In the wake of September 11, 2001, the US government under the George Bush misadministration passed the Patriot Act and the "Section 215 Bulk telephony metadata program" which began to pave the way for the increasing collection of big (meta)data – analyzing cell phone usage, internet browsing habits, IP addresses etc. – which allows for increasing surveillance. It is an Orwellian universe in which Big Brother is always watching but thanks to social media, we ourselves provide much of the information the government utilizes every time we tweet our location or update our Facebook status. We are in fact our own Big Brother.

In the film, Spectre, it is M, head of MI6, played by Ralph Fiennes who seems to have not only a stiff upper lip but also lockjaw, who voices the critique of Big Brother's Big Data surveillance. In the nonfictional world, intelligence agencies have in recent years become obsessed with big data, hoping it will prevent future terrorist attacks by zeroing in on potential terrorists before they act. But attending the first vote to see whether C will manage to convince nine governments to pass the fictional "Nine Eyes" program, M is relieved when South Africa refuses to toe the line and prevents the unanimous vote necessary to implement the program. It is M who makes it clear to the viewer that this is not a democratically–elected body and their unprecedented monopoly of information on a global scale in the information age would give them unprecedented control with no checks or balances because who in fact would watch the watchers, surveil the surveillors to make sure they do not misuse the data for nefarious purposes.

Which of course they do…And so when it turns out that C is actually sending the data streams straight to SPECTRE's headquarters situated in Morocco (and still no actual Islamists appear), we get the message that big data surveillance is a baddie. If there's a bad guy, this hackneyed film must present us with an alternative and the good guy is what the film director, Sam Mendes, calls the "old values" - MI6's old-fashioned, traditional espionage tactics using real people agents on the ground. So we are supposed to get behind the "old values" in which agents like Bond do not kill robotically from afar like drones but instead, look their victims straight in the eye as they assassinate them to earn their double-O status. Armed with their "license to kill," they gallivant around the globe blowing up buildings, throwing toothy villains out of helicopters, wrecking exorbitantly-priced luxury vehicles, and bedding ever-pliant females whilst supposedly fighting for the values of democracy and capitalism and preventing the world from devolving into bedlam and barbary. In other words, James Bond is our hero and just as he rescues an endless stream of sexy damsels in distress, he is supposed to rescue us from all the specters of terror out there in the world.

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Except all the specters of terror are right here in this world and big data surveillance is just as much responsible for that world, just as destructive a force, as the James Bonds. Where was James Bond in the deadly Paris attacks of January and November, 2015? Every time another tragic attack occurs, the West seizes the opportunity to usher in more and more legislation to increase levels of less and less-regulated surveillance but wasn't big data surveillance supposed to prevent these types of attacks from reoccurring?

Right-wing, pro-surveillance commentators have gone so far as to blame these attacks on Snowden, claiming that his "betrayal" revealed western government methods of surveillance to the enemy and thus now they know how to evade detection. Their suggestion is to further increase surveillance whilst other so-called security experts suggest that resuscitating more on the ground, intelligence-gathering agents in the field is necessary.

But this is a false binary. In the wake of every horrific attack, western governments respond by doing both, increasing surveillance and upping the numbers of spies. But maybe "my name is Bond, James Bond" – the epitome of the suave white guy with his upper crust British accent and an unflappable sense of moral superiority – can teach us something after all. In the fictional universe of the film, SPECTRE orchestrates a terrorist bombing in Cape Town and South Africa quickly backtracks and approves the Nine Eyes program which can now go forward with all countries on board. In the nonfictional world reeling from the Paris attacks, France has already upped its drone strikes on Syria and is being urged to join the Five Eyes program for increased "information sharing" and Britain has decided to employ 1,900 more spies.

The abysmal Spectre tells us that big data surveillance is no savior of democracy but quite possibly its downfall. It then tries to tell us that Mr. Bond can save the world. But what happens if we are smarter than that and start to realize that neither of these are really the best options for fighting an enemy when that enemy is still not yet clearly identified. The enemies of the West - Saddam Hussein, al-Qaeda, ISIS – would any of these have come into existence without the West? Indeed, how many in al-Qaeda and ISIS come from the West?

Maybe in fact, the Bond film genre is quite subversive because it teaches us that trying to identify the real villain is an oblique task requiring a trip through a hall of mirrors. At first we think it is SPECTRE...but the British government is involved...is SPECTRE controlling the British government...or is it the other way round? And who controls western governments in a world dominated by the powerful military-industrial complex that lobbies for war and more war? In the end, who will we find looking back at us in the mirror?

During this particular 21st-century age of terror, the West keeps revisiting two strategies for dealing with its enemies: remotely – big data surveillance, air strikes, drone strikes or directly – agents in the field, troops on the ground. In the aftermath

of particularly vicious attacks, they often choose both strategies: big data surveillance combined with a caricaturized James Bond-style shoot first, never ask if you hit your target because if you crash enough cars, derail enough trains, bomb enough targets, blow up enough people, surely, you will eventually get the bad guy, no matter the "collateral damage."

The problem is that neither of these strategies destroys the enemy. It creates the enemy. Neither addresses the root causes of this system of cyclical violence and until that happens, nothing will really change. But perhaps these strategies are not meant to stop violence. Perhaps they are meant, like the organization SPECTRE, to engender infinite savagery, endless war, ceaseless destruction, mindless mayhem so that we must constantly live with the specter of terror.

We seem to like to watch it at the movies, and maybe we just like to watch it in real life as well?

Maybe Mr. Bond cannot confront Islamist militancy because it is too close to home and the mirror might crack?

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