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Quantum of Solace

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Quantum of Solace

Abstract

This is a review of *Quantum of Solace* (2008).

Ian Fleming's debonair British spy James Bond is a creation that has had a singularly impressive legacy. The character has inspired (among other things) no less than twelve best-sellers, two short story collections, several young adult novels, comic books, an animated television show, several video games, and the highest-grossing film franchise in history. Until the Blackwell Philosophy & Pop Culture Series published *James Bond and Philosophy: Questions are Forever* in 2006, though, remarkably little of substance had ever been written by scholars of philosophy and religion about the character. This is somewhat startling when one considers assessments of Fleming's invention by some cultural critics: the *Sunday Times*, for example, once dismissed the entire Bond mythos as "anti-humanist and anti-Christian." To be fair, the character is neither spiritually-oriented nor politically correct: an imperialist rake with a ready quip and a license to kill, Bond is a quintessentially irreverent product of Western male imagination. Also, though the series has consistently demonstrated a self-reflexive sense of humor, it was not until the 2006 tour de force *Casino Royale* that the filmmakers really decided to mull over the meaning of James Bond. Reinvented by director Martin Campbell and brooding leading man Daniel Craig as a borderline sociopath still within reach of redemption, the protagonist was transformed from unflappable superman to tortured soul. *Casino Royale* made clear that the franchise had for the most part moved past tongue-in-cheek bravado, and that the drama would now revolve

around the possible salvation of a self-medicating alcoholic who allows his rage, sorrow and considerable talent to be exploited by the state.

The twenty-second film in EON Productions' official series, and the first direct sequel, Marc Forster's *Quantum of Solace* picks up exactly five minutes after the conclusion of the previous entry. Agent 007, James Bond (Craig again), reports back to MI6 chief M (Judi Dench) with captured villain Mr. White (Jesper Christensen) in tow. The prisoner reveals that he is one of many players in a large and dangerous criminal enterprise that no one seems to know anything about. Things only get worse when a hitherto loyal bodyguard tries to kill M. Despite his clear lack of emotional distance from the case – he's still reeling from the betrayal and loss of Vesper Lynd (Eva Green), and bent on finding those responsible for manipulating her into treason – 007 is sent off to follow what few clues there are. The path eventually leads to South America, where shady environmentalist Dominic Greene (Mathieu Almaric) is discovered to be in cahoots with General Medrano (Joaquín Cosío), Bolivia's new leader by coup d'état. Having used his influence to destabilize the government for Medrano, Greene is now angling for some seemingly worthless desert land on behalf of a shadowy organization known only as Quantum. Though all the various international intelligence agencies are united in assuming that Quantum is desperately hoping to find oil where there isn't any, Bond suspects something more sinister. Before long, 007 and Camille Montes

(Olga Kurylenko), a Bolivian Secret Service agent with her own ax to grind, become a bit too much trouble for the syndicate. Greene demands that his CIA partners, the odious Gregg Beam (David Harbour) and the deeply conflicted Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright), do something about it, and so the Americans trump up evidence linking Bond to some high crimes. This leaves the UK's Foreign Secretary (Tim Pigott-Smith) with no alternative but to put out a "capture or kill" order on Bond. Effectively off the reservation and on the lam, our protagonist enlists the help of disgruntled former colleague René Mathis (Giancarlo Giannini) and MI6 field operative Strawberry Fields (Gemma Arterton). But it is only by reconnecting with Montes that 007 is able to uncover the scope of Greene's nefarious plan and come to grips with the futility of his quest for vengeance.

Taking its title and nothing else from one of Fleming's short stories, *Quantum of Solace* certainly succeeds in deepening the franchise's newfound introspective streak. Though Forster, director of such A-list dramas as *Monster's Ball*, *Finding Neverland*, and *The Kite Runner*, seems to feel that he must compensate for the film's more serious inclinations with an overabundance of hyperkinetic action sequences, he nonetheless impresses by finding spiritual matters to ponder in places one would not necessarily expect. Indeed, it's in the slower spots where he and his screenwriters (including Crash's Academy Award-winning writer/director Paul Haggis) come through with a fairly interesting,

multifaceted meditation on sin. The film is full of both “good” and “bad” characters committing moral transgressions – small and large, gross and subtle, insignificant and hugely significant. From the apathetic ethical comprising of Leiter to the wanton hedonism of Medrano, *Quantum of Solace* has much to say about the pervasiveness, the commonness, of sin. In fact, in the universe of the film, most everyone is susceptible to the influence of the worst angels of their nature and capable of some measure of evil. When Medrano plays hardball with Quantum over a contract, an unimpressed Greene reminds him, “We deal with the left and the right, dictators or liberators. If the current president had been more agreeable, I wouldn’t be talking to you. So if you decide not to sign, you’ll wake up with...your willing replacement standing over you.”

At the center of all this, of course, is the new, darker, more thoughtful version of James Bond, who is trying to negotiate his thirst for revenge with his responsibilities as an agent of Her Majesty’s government. “I’m motivated by my duty,” he insists. The dubious M responds, “I think you’re so blinded by inconsolable rage that you don’t care who you hurt.” Our protagonist is also taken to task for the sins he’s come to be loved by audiences for: in a sly, politicized nod to 1963’s archetypal Goldfinger, for example, a dead woman dipped in crude oil and sprawled across a bed proves to be an arresting image. Not pulling her punches, a furious M reprimands an already remorseful 007 for his opportunistic and

consistently costly lovemaking, saying, “How many [dead women] is that now? They’ll do anything for you, won’t they?”

Forster composes other striking visuals that bring the film’s underlying theme into powerfully stark relief: most prominent among these, of course, is a shoot-out that takes place during a lavish production of Puccini’s opera *Tosca*, which itself revolves around issues of immorality and vengeance. It’s in such carefully composed shots and sequences as these (including some which have explicitly religious overtones) that provocative reflections about the forgiveness of sin and the inanity of retributive justice begin to emerge. One especially affecting moment has Bond cradling the dying Mathis in his arms – an image that at once evokes Michelangelo’s *La Pietá* – as the latter whispers compassionately, “Forgive Vesper...forgive yourself.” Also, in one of the last scenes of the film, Bond and Montes look out at the bleak Bolivian desert, contemplating their futures after quite literally going through hell (so much so that their clothes and faces are singed). Referring to her murdered mother and sister, Montes asks, “Do you think they can sleep now?” Though Bond has educated Montes on how to settle her score, even offering guidance on how to breathe when she pulls the trigger, his ideas have changed as a result of their experiences. Recognizing that their pain has not been diminished one iota by exercising their wrath, 007 replies despondently, “I don’t think the dead care about vengeance.”

To be fair, *Quantum of Solace* definitely wants to have its cake and eat it too: lots of “crowd-pleasing” retributive justice is in fact doled out. (It should be noted that Greene’s coup de grâce is probably the coldest yet in the franchise’s history.) This is the paradox of other, similarly well-meaning franchise pictures, such as the Bourne films and Christopher Nolan’s Batman reboots. On the one hand, it’s exciting that these filmmakers have effectively chosen to stop condoning their heroes’ deeds: foregoing the usual mindless bloodshed and empty stylistics of the genre, they have instead seized these opportunities to highlight the moral ambiguities in our modern myths – particularly the ones that have a lot of resonance at this moment in history. On the other hand, though, these films are big, expensive studio action pictures, and they must still traffic in the kind of white-knuckle thrills and violent spectacles that sell tickets.

While *Quantum of Solace* doesn’t reconcile the action with the message of restorative justice as deftly as, say, *The Dark Knight*, the film nonetheless deserves to be commended for its climax, which denies 007 his payback: finally face-to-face with the man most directly responsible for Vesper’s death, Bond trains his famous Walther PPK on him...and the film fades into the next scene. In what follows, he is shown exiting the man’s apartment complex, where M is waiting. Though she clearly assumes that the man is dead, she nonetheless asks, “Is he still alive?” “He is,” Bond replies. “I’m surprised,” she says after a beat. The viewer, though, is less

surprised: the victory here is not in one more killing, but in realizing that it won't solve anything – not his pain, nor the problems he's tasked to help solve. As unbelievable as it might be, the silver screen's favorite cad has spiritually matured.