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## The Bourne Ultimatum

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# The Bourne Ultimatum

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007).

In a small but unforgettable role in 2002's *The Bourne Identity*, Clive Owen plays a CIA assassin tracking fellow sniper and amnesiac Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) across Europe. In the aftermath of their final showdown, Owen's "Professor" lies badly wounded in a field. When Bourne approaches, he discovers not a steely killing machine, but rather a very lost and vulnerable soul, who sighs out mournfully, "Look at this. Look at what they make you give." It's a genuinely haunting moment, and one that echoes throughout the entire Bourne trilogy. Audiences have slowly been discovering over the course of the films that Bourne, like the Professor, is a man who has given up so much of his humanity that there's simply nothing left. Indeed, it's not really that he has lost his memory but that he has surrendered his heart and mind so completely he can't remember anything before that.

Our scrappy protagonist is getting wise to this as we catch up with him in this year's *The Bourne Ultimatum*. Bourne now knows the full extent of his actions. He knows that he's killed innocents on the orders of those with dubious motives, and is trying his best to be accountable. He is also trying to solve the last piece of the memory puzzle and uncover just how he got turned into an assassin in the first place. An in-over-his-head reporter (Paddy Considine) and one of his former CIA colleagues (Julia Stiles) have important clues that send Bourne from Turin to Paris to London to Madrid to Tangier and eventually to New York City. Though he's

dogged all along the way by henchmen of the agency's shady directorate (David Strathairn, Scott Glenn, and Albert Finney), he finds an ally in Pamela Landy (Joan Allen), the agent who previously hunted him in Europe and knows that he is not the threat her scheming superiors claim he is. It all leads to the trilogy's denouement, where Bourne confronts the reality of his role in becoming a trained killer: that he coldly chose an obedient, dangerously uncritical "patriotism" over the serious reservations of his spirit.

The *Bourne* films are a cut above other action thriller franchises in terms of plausibility, sophistication, and especially moral conscience—despite all the focus on hired guns, life is by no means cheap in these movies. *Identity* is a sleek, gripping, and thoughtful thriller in the Hitchcockian vein, masterfully helmed by Doug Liman (he of *Swingers* fame). It is sensational from start to finish, thanks to its classy, mature storytelling. 2004's *The Bourne Supremacy*, directed by Oscar-nominated United 93 auteur Paul Greengrass, is really a straight-up action film, but one with more than a passing interest in the politics and problems of state-sponsored violence. *Ultimatum*, also directed by Greengrass, essentially stays the course set by *Supremacy*. The new film is more of the same, ratcheted up a few requisite notches: a relevant "spy flick" with bigger set pieces and faster car chases.

Like its predecessors, *Ultimatum* benefits enormously from its leading man: in his signature role, Damon is once again superb, bringing exactly the right amount

of grit and pathos to the ambiguous title character. The work of Greengrass behind the camera is exceptional as well; this film is the work of an innovator. Whereas most contemporary action filmmakers have not figured out how to produce anything terribly artful with rapid-fire cutting and erratic camera work, Greengrass is able to use these techniques to accent an already distinctive, vérité-influenced approach to the genre. (Think Costa-Gavras after several pots of coffee.) Aided in no small part by Christopher Rouse's editing, Oliver Wood's cinematography, and John Powell's score, the director comes through with some of the most exhilarating action sequences put to film in recent memory. (In particular, the sequence at London's Waterloo Station is some kind of masterpiece.)

Greengrass and his screenwriting team (including Michael Clayton writer-director Tony Gilroy and an uncredited Tom Stoppard) also manage to make *Ultimatum* a bit more topical than previous entries in the *Bourne* trilogy. With assassination, rendition, torture, and government surveillance all serving as important plot points, the room for commentary on headline news is (unfortunately) immense, and this is not lost on the filmmakers. (For example, most of the scenes between Allen and Strathairn have their characters vocalizing the pros and cons of all-too-real homeland security protocols.) Additionally, the film gives Greengrass an opportunity to explore the theme of doubt, albeit broadly. How did Jason Bourne get so low? The answer posited in *Ultimatum* is that he opted for blind faith in the

moments when he desperately needed to be skeptical and think. This aspect of the plot has a rich metaphorical significance for those of us interested in the presence of religious themes in modern cinema: the protagonist's blind faith in a far right-wing, jingoistic idea of nationalism leads to an existential crisis, just as a spirituality lacking the ballast of a healthy and natural skepticism would. (There's probably an interesting paper waiting to be written about the similarities between Jason Bourne's journey of self-discovery and James W. Fowler's stages of faith development.) At a fundamental level, Bourne's questions and doubts are who he is. His decision to ignore them is how he loses his identity and his humanity – how he forgets who he is.

*The Bourne Ultimatum* is primarily a cautionary tale: Bourne's story reminds us that listening to our doubts is not only a necessity for democratic citizenship but also spirituality. As the exorbitant costs of the "assault on reason" become more apparent with each passing day—global warming, the waging of devastating wars for specious reasons, the intensification of economic disparity, diseases taking on epidemic proportions, and so on—this is an essential message. Indeed, it is a message we haven't really gotten. We've lost something for things to have gone this bad. Perhaps this is why Greengrass frames the title character's last line of dialogue the way he does: Bourne is talking to the confused young assassin

(Edgar Ramirez) tasked with dispatching him, but his gaze is right at the audience when he sighs out, "Look at us. Look at what they make you give."