Critical Geopolitics and the Created Worlds of Post-9/11 Spy Film

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Critical Geopolitics and the Created Worlds of Post-9/11 Spy Film

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Christ, I miss the Cold War.”

-M (Judi Dench) in Casino Royale (Campbell, 2006, 0:17:53)

Popular film is a key resource to help scholars learn about the prevailing ideals of a moment in time (Dittmer 2010). When an idea becomes so pervasive that it reaches into our culture sectors, we know that it must be important. Much work has already been completed on the links between American politics and the prevalence of superhero media, whether in the comic book world (Dittmer, 2005) or in the ever-increasing superhero film sector (Pollard, 2011; Upton, 2014). However, in this thesis I seek to examine films that have the closest thing to “superheroes” that could exist in the real world: super spies. While the genre of spy film has been around for many years and continues to be popular, it has not been sufficiently studied from a critical geographical point of view. I seek to fill in this discrepancy with my research.

Using the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, as my chief historical event of influence, I analyze spy films in the James Bond and Mission: Impossible film franchises to get a sense of how these films reflected and reproduced the popular ideologies of their time. This fairly recent historical event provides a boundary for my coverage because it is impactful enough to have had some influence on culture, yet recent enough to require further study and for its lessons to be learned from and implemented in today’s world. While researchers have examined action films in the wake of 9/11 and other global events (Pollard, 2011; Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo, 2014; McSweeney, 2014), I believe the spy franchise film has been critically understudied. In this thesis, I explore the portrayal of global cities and the themes in 21st century
spy film franchises to understand what worldviews are being reinforced and created through these films. Using the framework of critical geopolitics, I hope to provide a reading of these films’ ideologies that they portray both through their visual cues to place and their thematic focuses and dialogue. My goal is to bring further attention to the genre of spy franchise films as a subject of scholarly concern and to point out the geographical imaginaries that these films reproduce. This research adds to the general scholarship on post-9/11 action film, with a distinct geographical and critical geopolitical spin. In this first chapter, I present my research questions before taking the time to give a brief overview of my selected franchises, I also clarify my rationale for examining spy film in particular. In my next chapter, I present the literature I am drawing upon and describe my methodology.

Research Question and Initial Findings

This work uses critical geopolitics to analyze the post-9/11 spy film genre in order to learn more about the common fears present in media at the time. To do so in a manageable format, I decided to focus on the content of the films themselves and the themes that they show. My primary question is, in what ways do spy films help us understand popular geopolitical imaginations in a post-9/11 United States? I plan on answering this in a few ways, most notably by examining the thematic portrayals of “threats” in the ten films in the Mission: Impossible and James Bond films that were released following 9/11. After completing my research, I grouped my findings into three main themes:
These films mostly handled the events of 9/11 through subtext and similar imagery.

These films were not a break from the themes of the Cold War, but a reimagining of these themes.

“New” threats do not follow national borders.

Overall, I argue that post-9/11 franchise spy films reflect and replicate an imperialist worldview of British and United States interests. I examine the use of world locations as well as thematic elements such as plot and dialogue to find what each of these films says about the ways their own world works. In doing this, I seek to show that these films promote a vision of the world that reflects the dominant ideologies of the times and places in which they were made.

Why Spy Film? Why 9/11?

Espionage in fiction is a semi-specialized topic of study. While scholars have certainly written about spy films (Buckton, 2015), geographical examination of the genre has largely been grouped alongside other action films. Spy film necessitates portrayals of government and the many locales around the world that British and American government have interests in, which introduces imperialism as a key undertone of the genre. The two secret agencies in these films are directly tasked with operating outside of their respective countries, and characters are expected to travel around the world to accomplish their missions. In each location in these films, the main characters are focused on protecting Britain, the United States, or the world at large,
adding to the imperialist idea that only these agents representing these states can protect humanity.

While this is a lesser part of my focus, I want to bring up the common theme of technology in spy films. This theme manifests itself both in the gadgets and tools that these fictional agents use but also in the use of existing government surveillance methods to watch citizens. Catherine Zimmer’s 2015 book *Surveillance Cinema* observes the portrayal of technology across films including the *Mission: Impossible* series, and in my own viewing of these and other films from around the same time period, I have noticed a general distrust of technology and surveillance in film in the post-9/11 time period. The prevalence of technology in spy films and the growing specter of surveillance after 9/11 makes spy films an interesting space to interrogate the general zeitgeist’s feelings about technology.

When choosing my time period, I first considered studying the spy franchise films released after the end of the Cold War in 1991. Geopolitical and film scholars have suggested that post-Cold War film is noticeably marked by a “[search] for a new enemy […]” (Sharp, 1998, p. 152). This shift in film after the Cold War was especially felt by spy film, whose “[i]nternational intrigue […] could no longer rely on the East against West trope” (Upton, 2014, p. 13). However, as I started to research the topic and watch other action films that came out in the 21st century, I realized that modern action film seems to be more heavily impacted by the idea of terrorism and 9/11 in particular than by the lack of enemy that the Cold War ending provided. Of course, spy film continually references the Cold War, as the espionage sector took off at that time, and characters will occasionally reminisce about the “ease” of having a common enemy. However, this same search for an enemy continued in post-9/11 cinema, with the added influence of major destruction. Where the Cold War brought with it only the possibility of attacks on the
“Western world,” 9/11 showed that such attacks could be possible, and even imminent. Researchers mark that the broadcast news images of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon resembled scenes from action movies (Vanhala, 2011, p. 17). As a result of this outsized impact, I have chosen to start my analysis at the year 2001.

A good way to know what a particular culture is anxious about is to look at the threats in films where its spy base is presumably the hero. Who is the power or the threat that is so dangerous to the metaphorical representation of the state? What role does location have in casting the heroes and villains? A few common themes pop up when analyzing these films as a whole. The threat of nuclear annihilation, a holdover of the Cold War days, is ever-present in each film’s catalogue of horrors. The *M:I* series in particular tackles nuclear war as well as nuclear terrorism: in the fourth film, the antagonist fires a single missile from Russia to the United States in hopes that the two countries will retaliate and destroy the world, while the sixth film details specific terror groups who want to buy these items. I am analyzing these films in context with the geopolitical time in which they were made and try to see how the worlds these films create might correspond with the common perceived “threats” of the contemporary era. These themes form the basis of my thesis, and in following chapters I will directly interrogate the themes of nuclear destruction and terrorism in general.

Each of the franchises I study deal with the events of 9/11 differently. The James Bond franchise more directly interrogates 9/11, nearly recreating the attacks on-screen with the destruction of the MI6 building at Vauxhall Cross. I expand upon this thematic destruction in later chapters, but for now, suffice it to say that it is a visual reference that stands out among the films I used as sources. That isn’t to say that the *M:I* series completely shies away from any portrayal of 9/11, but I found the references to be much more subtextual than in the Bond films.
Despite the centering of America in these films, the attacks are not directly mentioned or represented as clearly. This lack of connection repeats itself in the available literature, as there is much less scholarly literature on the *M:I* films in general, especially in relation to 9/11, compared to the James Bond films. Perhaps this is because James Bond’s cultural legacy, from its highly popular book series to its longer-running film series, is more well known, but we can’t discount the *M:I* films just because they haven’t gotten a scholarly look at them. Applying this post-9/11 framework to the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, I find both the nuanced portrayal of nuclear terrorism that I mentioned before as well as a more focused look at the American action hero.

While I am analyzing these films from a post-9/11 point of view, I am not interested only in explaining the connection that the events have on these films. Instead, I use the events of 9/11 as both a reference point for these films and a way to delineate time. The geopolitical situation certainly shifted monumentally after 9/11, with governments now reckoning with the physical threat that terrorism provided to Western nations. Taking this into account, though, I also want to make sure that I am not stretching to tie every event in these films back to the events of 9/11 themselves. This is to say that I use the term “post-9/11” in this thesis with a dual meaning, encapsulating both how these films are touched by politics of portraying a world that saw the events of 9/11, but also how these films are themselves being released in 2002 and beyond.

**Selected Franchises and Rationale**

This thesis examines films that were released after 9/11 in the *Mission: Impossible* and James Bond film franchises. The *Mission: Impossible* film series follows the adventures of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and the Impossible Mission Force, an internationally focused agency tasked
with the most difficult operations, as the name implies. *Mission: Impossible* began first as a television show in 1966, a move which some credit to the popularity of the James Bond movies (Britton, 2004). The series lasted for seven seasons until it was cancelled in 1973, but it returned for a two-season reboot in 1988. The film franchise began in 1996 with the eponymous film, which features Hunt being framed by a corrupt member of the IMF who is looking to profit from selling secret identities of IMF agents. This theme of corruption from within continues in *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000), this time when a former agent attempts to threaten world governments with an engineered virus that only he can provide the cure for. The first post-9/11 film of the franchise, *Mission: Impossible III* (2006), still includes internal corruption with a mole in the agency, but its main villain is an international arms dealer in search of a mystery weapon only known as the “Rabbit’s Foot”. In terms of large-scale destruction, the first glimpse that the *M:I* series gets is in *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol*, in which the Kremlin – Russia’s seat of government – explodes. Once again, Hunt is framed and is disavowed by the American government, forced to track down on his own a Russian nuclear extremist that wants to implement mutually assured destruction and even gets the chance to fire a warhead at San Francisco, though it is deactivated before it detonates.

*Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* sets up a group of secret agents presumed dead who are now meddling in political affairs for the highest bidder, whether that means downing a passenger aircraft or killing the prime minister of Austria, but the group’s main aims in this film are centered on securing funding for their operation to continue underground. And most recently, *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* once again brings up the theme of nuclear war, but this time centers it on an aquifer that supplies a third of the world with food from croplands. The head of the group of agents from the previous film, a disgraced MI6 agent (Sean Harris) makes a return,
and an American agent (Henry Cavill) is the true believer whose credo “the greater the suffering, the greater the peace” propels him. These later films focus on global terror groups rather than the whims of one person. While I am only analyzing the latter 4 films, knowing about the series in general is important to understand the character motivations of Ethan Hunt.

The James Bond franchise has a much longer history both in novel form and in film. The first Bond movie, Dr. No, was released in 1962, and 24 other films have followed with the most recent being released in 2021. For the purposes of this project, I am considering the six films released after 9/11, though I occasionally draw upon the three films released between the end of the Cold War and 9/11 to give broader context. The first movie I consider, Die Another Day (2002) is slightly removed from the rest of the Bond canon I am analyzing closely – the franchise casts different actors in the title role, and this film stars Pierce Brosnan as compared to the later films’ Daniel Craig – and it deals with a largely fantastical plot: North Korean agent is planning on using a space laser to invade South Korea. The Daniel Craig Bond films, which began in 2006 with Casino Royale, are commonly seen as a realistic shift in the franchise, focusing less on quips and fantastical gadgets and more on the gritty nature of spycraft in the 21st century.

Casino Royale follows Bond’s quest to take down Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen), a criminal who finances terrorist operations and makes money on the side by sabotaging industries that he bets against. In Quantum of Solace (2008), Bond is facing a network looking to control the world’s water supply, aptly showing the pull that the world’s water resources have in controlling the fates of different countries. Skyfall (2012) is a more personal story in which an ex-agent, betrayed by M, seeks revenge on the institution of British Intelligence and hacks into security networks, bringing with it the theme of techno-terrorism. In Spectre (2015), the eponymous criminal organization plans to surveil the world and bend it in their own favor.
Finally, the most recent Bond film *No Time to Die* (2021) gets back to the franchise’s more fantastical roots, with its villain creating a disease that targets specific DNA and makes it possible to target groups of people with alarming precision.

I choose to analyze these franchises in relation to one another for a variety of reasons, mostly because they fit similar thematic structures. These “great men” occupy a space that is both within and outside of the traditional state: each of them both work for the government but are not afraid to defy orders and trust themselves rather than the bureaucratic process. The “old ways” are being pushed out by other actors, and it is up to our heroes to prove that the old ways are best – as long as they are kept in their safe, capable hands. Each of these men are disavowed by the organizations that give them legitimacy, yet we as the viewer are meant to support him, viewing the scenes through his eyes, always aware of his innocence by virtue of knowing his every move and trusting them to be the right ones. In *Mission: Impossible, Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol,* and *Mission: Impossible – Fallout,* Ethan Hunt is framed – first for killing the rest of his agent team, then for bombing the figurehead of Russian state power, and finally for being the nuclear-obsessed agent that he has been trying to take down. However, none of these films takes the revolutionary approach of portraying the entire government as warmongers focused only on American prosperity. While *Fallout* comes closest by showing the head of the CIA as someone more concerned with administrative cleanliness than solving the actual problems or saving lives, at the end of each film the agent is welcomed back into the fold with open arms.

Another benefit of choosing these two franchises is because of their longevity. Both franchises are releasing new installments to this day — the most recent Bond film hit theaters in 2021, and the next *M:I* film is set to be released this July. This shows that each of these
franchises are currently contributing their own versions of worldviews and may be influenced by current events. Studying these franchises can provide relevant conclusions not just for the films released shortly after the events of 9/11 but also for the films that have had more time to grapple with these events, their ramifications, and other events that happened in the meantime. These franchises also existed before the 9/11 attacks and continue well past them, spread throughout the entire period of time that I am studying (9/11 to the present day). I can therefore look at the evolution of these portrayals over time in comparison to their pre-9/11 counterparts and come away with a nuanced read of the situation’s changes over time.

In explaining why I am analyzing the James Bond and M:I franchises, I must also explain why I have chosen to leave out a fairly prominent example of post-9/11 spy film: the Jason Bourne franchise. This set of four films beginning in 2002 depicted an American agent (Matt Damon) who has been turned into a violent force for United States interests and is now struck with amnesia. The antagonists in these films are not other state actors but the American government itself, all of its cruelty in full display as Bourne regains his memories and the brutal training he went through to become an emotionless killing machine. The franchise is lauded for its unique style of editing and cinematography, favoring a shaking camera and quick edits to correspond to the chaos of the scenes. The Jason Bourne films are consistently deemed as responses to 9/11 and the ensuing actions of the United States government, especially after “suspicions about the fabrication of evidence about the mandate for the Iraq war and the reduction of civil liberties flowing from the 2001 Patriot Act” (Purse, 2011, p. 154). Vanhala (2011) observes that “after 9/11 the box office success of The Bourne Identity (2002) broke the ice created by the events of 9/11, clearing a path for sinister films in which one cannot trust the government” (p. 101).
However, I have chosen not to include the Bourne films for one key reason. Instead of examining the self-critical government responses to 9/11 in spy film, I am interested in the more “positive” reactions to this era of deep government distrust and the worldviews that these films promote. In both the James Bond and Mission: Impossible franchises, there are bad actors in the government, but these bad actors are always caught and dealt with by the “good” members of the government. We might be left with the feeling that governments can be ineffective, but we are led to believe that they are capable of rooting out the “bad apples.” Further research on spy films might benefit from looking at all three franchises in comparison, and including this franchise might fill in some of the darker geopolitical imaginations of the post-9/11 age that this thesis leaves out. There has also been some readings of these franchises that point out the similar “grittiness” and the vulnerability of action heroes (Gaine, 2017, p. 132). Nevertheless, these Bond and M:I films are inherently idealistic as far as state power goes, and I am focusing on the thematic and geographic effects of this idealism for this thesis.

Research Significance

This project attempts to open a deeper conversation about the ways that geopolitical geographies are created in film and how these geographies can be heavily influenced by real-world events. Additionally, it is a future-facing project that aims for a greater general and scholarly understanding of the use of place in spy films. I also hope for this thesis to provide a basis for greater appreciation for spy film in scholarly study, especially in our current, post-9/11 world. Spy films like James Bond have been studied for years, as referenced in this introduction and in my literature review section. However, work on Mission: Impossible films is much less prevalent, and even rarer still is work that compares these two large franchises to one another
through a geopolitical lens. While I want this thesis to stand on its own, I also view it as a testament to the legitimacy of academic study of spy films.

This research on two different imperial forces in film will give any resulting research more legitimacy as a study of empire in general and not one that focuses solely on British imperialism in Bond movies. My research will hopefully provide a geopolitical standard that these films can be analyzed within. Additionally, while I try to provide some historical context, this thesis is primarily concerned with depicting the events that happen in the movie rather than giving a history of these productions. This helps provide more context for future research that might analyze parts of these films more closely.

Overall, I am conducting this thesis to think more deeply about a part of culture that is ever-present and yet does not receive an appropriate level of popular scrutiny. I believe that this research will help us understand the often-overlooked ways in which mass-market films portray the world around us and to hopefully bring more attention to the explicit and implicit messages conveyed about place in spy films.
Chapter Two: Literature Review and Methodology

“Film offers geographers a realm of knowledge which combines multiple perspective, imagination, art, objective and subjective qualities, geographic information and geographical imagination.”

- Chris Lukinbeal and Stefan Zimmermann, 2006, p. 316

In this chapter, I go over the wider literatures that I draw upon in my analysis. These literatures include film geography, critical geopolitics, and post-9/11 film studies, each of which inform my research. I also outline how my research will contribute to these bodies of work by combining these geopolitical and geographical conceptions and applying them to the specific time period and genre I am studying. Then, I detail my methodology for collecting data on the considered films and how I analyze this data, paying close attention to the effectiveness of each method for answering my thesis question. This chapter will give a better understanding of how my thesis adds to the scholarly conversation, as well as how my observations were made. It will also prepare readers for the format of my analysis in the following chapters, which draws heavily upon lines of dialogue and images from the films I use as sources.

Literature Review

Because this topic takes a heavily textual approach to research and applying theories to a specific time and genre of film, my literature review examines the core tenets of film geography, theories of critical geopolitics, and post-9/11 film studies. I draw heavily upon these scholars and
their work as I apply their theories to my chosen films, combining these ways of thinking into a geopolitical- and geographical-centered lens.

Film Geography

Film geography is a subfield of cultural geography that “links the spatiality of cinema with the social and cultural geographies of everyday life” (Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 316). Sommerlad and Escher both trace the subfield back to Bela Balázs and his 1924 analysis of film landscapes (Sommerlad, 2021, p. 118; Escher, 2006, p. 307). However, Lukinbeal and Zimmermann mention John K. Wright’s 1947 essay “Terrae Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography” as a key precursor for the discipline (2006, p. 316). The essay, which explores the idea of “unknown lands” both physical and intangible, defends the merit of “intuitive and aesthetic imagining” in geographical work (Wright, 1947, p. 6). Wright designates formal geographical studies as the “core area” as set apart from the periphery:

[T]he periphery includes all of the informal geography contained in non-scientific works — in books of travel, in magazines and newspapers, in many a page of fiction and poetry, and on many a canvas. Although much of this informal geography offers little of value to us, some of it shows an insight deep into the heart of the matters with which we are most closely concerned. (Wright, 1947, p. 10)

Wright (1947) then proposes the term “geosophy” as “the study of geographical knowledge from any or all points of view” (p. 12) and implores geographers to spend time studying “aesthetic geosophy, the study of the expression of geographical conceptions in literature and art” (p. 15). While these marked the early rumblings of the subfield, Escher (2006) concludes that geographers Burgess and Gold brought geographical study of mass media into the mainstream
with their publication of *Geography, the Media and Popular Culture* in 1985 (p. 307). In Burgess and Gold’s introduction to the book, they write, “[t]he institutions and practices that comprise the media […] are an integral part of pop culture and, as such, are an essential element in molding individual and social experiences of the world and in shaping the relationship between people and place” (1985, p. 1).

Key to this subfield is the understanding that “cinema produces a ‘reality-effect’ — a simulacrum of the real,” as opposed to showing the “real” itself (Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2008, p. 19). This “reality-effect” is manifested both in skewed depictions of place or setting (Lefebvre, 2006; Loukides & Fuller, 1993) as well as a redefined cultural imagination and perception (Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2006; Aitken & Dixon, 2006; Cresswell & Dixon, 2002). I am interested in the ways in which creating these new worlds serve to hide parts of the real world, especially in film dealing with politics.

The film geography subfield allows scholars to apply geographic ideas of place, both physical and imaginary, to the film industry and its tools as well as to films themselves. People have explored (among many other things) the depiction of cities (Ford, 1994; Barber, 2002; Roberts, 2012; Andersson & Webb, 2016), the translation of mobility onto film (Cresswell and Dixon, 2002; Brigham, 2015; Rovisco, 2012) and geopolitics. The latter I will explore more later on in this literature review, as I draw more heavily upon it.

Certain film geographers view film as a form of “travel” allowing people to experience other places that they might not get the chance to see (Corbin, 2015, pp. 2-5), and the books that the James Bond films are loosely based on made a point of promoting “touristic ways of seeing” the “exotic locales” frequently featured in Ian Fleming’s original novels (Denning, 2003, pp. 64-66). In film, the establishing shots monuments are used as shorthand for places, like the Eiffel
Tower being used to portray Paris or the Capitol building to show Washington, D. C. (Long, 2017). Long (2017) connects this use of buildings or landmarks to represent entire places with Saïd’s work on “Orientalism,” drawing attention to the “American geographical imaginary” that is presented through images and which brings with it underlying perceptions of that place that already exist in the minds of viewers (pp. 14-15).

My project seeks to build upon this possibility of film creating a skewed version of the world, both through examining the physical depictions of places as well as the ideological and cultural depictions that are influenced by empire. Building from the idea that no place can be filmed with complete accuracy, I look at the specific choices that the filmmaker made in what to portray and what not to portray about the world and, from these choices, surmise what the filmmaker or what society at large things is important at the time.

**Critical Geopolitics**

Critical geopolitics, as defined by Jason Dittmer (2010), “interrogates how and why we have come to think of the world (or parts of it) in a certain way” (p. 11). This lies in contrast with “classical geopolitics,” which represents the “statist, Eurocentric, balance-of-power conception of world politics that dominated much of the twentieth century” (Kuus, 2010, p. 2). It includes a focus on discourse and multiple perspectives to examine the power of states and their influences on people, specifically drawing on poststructuralist thought and created meanings of space (Dittmer, 2010). This differs from scholarship pointing to a more focused study of “war and peace problems” (van der Wusten & O’Laughlin, 1986, p. 19; van der Wusten & O’Laughlin, 1987), which critics point out as being “positivist” and not challenging the status quo enough to make a difference (Ó Tuathail, 1987; Dalby, 1991).
To construct critical political geographies is to argue that we must not limit our attention to a study of the geography of politics within pregiven, taken-for-granted, commonsense spaces, but investigate the politics of the geographical specification of politics.” (Dalby, 1991, p. 274).

Dalby’s above quote elucidates that critical geopolitics is about taking the presentation of geopolitics and examining it so that we may find the political influences on this presentation. He points out the bias of many geopolitical narratives and argues for geographers to criticize these narratives. This thesis takes on this challenge by critiquing the geopolitical narratives present in spy film.

Scholars examining film point to the end of the Cold War as a turning point in the depiction of places, where the world was searching for what to do with itself after its main defining conflict had all but disappeared (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Upton, 2014). While this discourse began before the Cold War ended, it typically involved scholars anxious about what the world would look like after an eventual Soviet defeat (Dalby, 1991). After the end of the war, the commonplace fears of nuclear attack and the spread of communism were no longer immanently relevant to audiences as they once were (Upton 2014). Instead of acting upon the understanding of the “East against West trope,” filmmakers had to focus on more relevant enemies (Upton, 2014, p. 13). While these Cold War-era fears did not disappear completely — Chapter Four of this thesis finds that they are still very much present — they could no longer be used in the same way that they once were.

Critical geopolitics is often used in relation to film, as it calls for deeper analysis of film as more than just a “representational medium” but a medium shaped by aesthetic and imperialist forces (Carter & Dodds, 2014, pp. 2-3). Based on the idea of the “geographic imagination,”
Dittmer and Dodds (2008), drawing upon Gregory (1994), call attention to “geopolitical imaginations” where audiences try “to make sense of the world by associating political values with various parts of that map” (p. 447). This reconstruction exists on both a physical and a mental plane, with some scholars positing that films “reproduce nations” by “[constructing] borders in the mind” (Coulter, 2010, p. 15). Michael J. Shapiro’s book *Cinematic Geopolitics* (2009) is a direct interrogation of the geopolitical thought present in post-Cold War films.

Within this idea is the topic of “popular geopolitics,” which my thesis uses more directly in its examination of popular film. Dittmer names “popular geopolitics” as a subset of critical geopolitics that examines the ways that countries are portrayed in media, including film, to everyday citizens (2010). My thesis more directly deals with this subtopic, since it is based on the portrayal of mass media franchises. However, an understanding of critical geopolitics is necessary as the underlying ideology of popular geopolitics.

Another explanation regarding the presentation of filmed ideas to audiences comes from Mark Lacy:

The cinema becomes a space where “commonsense” ideas about global politics and history are (re)produced and where stories about what is acceptable behavior from states and individuals are naturalized and legitimated. It is a space where myths about history and the origins of the state are told to a populist audience. (Lacy, 2003, p. 614)

Klaus Dodds has written extensively both on the James Bond films, occasionally with Lisa Funnell (Dodds, 2003; Dodds, 2014; Funnell & Dodds, 2017; Dodds & Funnell, 2018), and on popular geopolitics after 9/11 (Dodds, 2006; Dodds, 2008; Dodds, 2015). His and Jason Dittmer’s work (Dittmer, 2005; Dittmer, 2012; Dittmer & Bos, 2019) tie most frequently to my thesis, both in its presentation of popular geopolitics but also the focus on recent action and
specifically spy film. I will be referencing their works, among others, throughout this thesis as I try to add my own close analysis to their conversation about power in these popular films.

My project draws upon the portrayal of geopolitical interests of spy agencies, both in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, to examine what these franchises are communicating about the makeup of the world. These franchises are particularly well-suited for analysis through a geopolitical lens because they deal with the complex relationships between world threats (coming from individuals, organized groups, or sometimes countries themselves) and the governmental agencies that try to stop them. I primarily use the lens of critical and popular geopolitics as I analyze these sources, which have been studied on their own but rarely together. Additionally, as the Mission: Impossible film series has been largely understudied, I hope to broaden the available scholarship on critical and popular geopolitics with my contributions.

As with any method of study, critiques arise (Dittmer & Gray, 2010), and feminist geopolitics has risen to combat the homogenization of critical geopolitics. Merje Kuus (2010) applies feminist theory to counteract the proclivity for critical geopolitics to center on male figures and state actions rather than the many people that make up spaces. Kuus, referencing Sharp (2005), writes that “it takes the central tenet of feminist work – that the personal is also political – to posit that the personal is also geopolitical” (2010, p. 15). This thesis does focus on state actors, as I am interested in critiquing the dominant ideologies of the time. However, I felt it necessary to bring up this evolution and criticism of critical geopolitics to show that this field is not perfect and is itself corrupted by contemporary ideas of power, and also to help myself keep in mind that these narratives I examine are excluding a wide set of perspectives that are equally important to analyze in other circumstances. I also use this idea of feminist geopolitics to give
more power to the emotional and character-driven storylines in the films I analyze, as I pay particular attention to personal relationships, and I treat threats to these relationships as mimicking geopolitical threats as well. In this way, the “personal” in these films becomes “geopolitical” by their underlying implications. Additionally, I build upon Kuus’ mention of the prevalence of studying male figures to examine the imperialist and gendered dynamics with which these spies navigate the world.

Post-9/11 Film Studies

This thesis also references and adds to the work that has already been done on the topic of film — and in particular, action film — after 9/11. In the weeks after the attacks, the film industry seemed wary to touch on the attacks, with Warner Brothers Studios deciding to delay releasing Collateral Damage, a film featuring a significant terrorist plot against the United States (Vanhala, 2011, p. 2). However, the effects of the attacks went way beyond pushing back a film; they became absorbed into the larger culture and, thus, its movies. Tom Pollard (2011) observes that “the post 9/11 genre exudes violence, cynicism, and paranoia about disturbing, violent events, often including various forms of terrorism” (p. 4). Entire books have been written on this genre (Pollard, 2011; Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo, 2014; McSweeney, 2014), and books like Ian Scott’s American Politics in Hollywood Film (2011) received second editions with added chapters on the aftermath of 9/11 on film and television.

Common topics in these analyses deal with the emotional impact — Pollard’s book Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters (2011) is right on the nose in focusing his chapters on feelings like “Shock,” “Grief,” “Horror,” “Rage,” “Vengeance,” “Terror,” and “Paranoia,” with each chapter offering multiple examples of how these themes
permeated into popular culture. Characters were faced with the lack of protection they had from disasters, even when they gave up freedoms, with technology and surveillance typically at the forefront (Upton, 2014, p. 50). Lisa Purse (2011) touches on the revitalization of “heroism as a cultural idea” in film, mimicking the acclamation that first responders to the attacks received (p. 152).

Dodds (2008) writes that “image making has been central to the war on terror — from the burning towers of the World Trade Center to the ‘mission accomplished’ moment of May 2003 and, more recently, the exposure of prisoner abuse and rendition in a variety of locations around the world” (p. 1621). Indeed, people were interested in seeking out in fiction the images that they had been inundated with on screen: Vanhala (2011) posits that the subsequent surge in video rentals of terrorist-related movies like Die Hard and The Siege might have been due to people’s desire to see America win against terrorists in “fictional disasters” (p. 2).

Post-9/11 themes have been heavily explored in superhero films, from Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy (Upton, 2014) to films featuring Spider-Man or the X-Men (Pollard, 2011; Upton, 2014). While much research on the James Bond films and 9/11 have been dealt with in their own volumes (Comentale et al., 2005; Chapman, 2007; Funnell & Dodds, 2017) by virtue of the character’s expansive existence, there has also been some comparative studies of popular spy film which involve pitting James Bond against Jason Bourne (Upton, 2014). There is much less overall analysis on the Mission: Impossible films, though some work does exist (Zimmer, 2015, pp. 115-156; Long, 2016). While there is work comparing the Bond and M:I films through a post-Cold War lens (Borzakian & Rouiaï, 2020), there is little that compares these films from a post-9/11 standpoint. My thesis intends to bridge this gap by comparing these two imperial-centered franchises together and add to the literature on each, as I feel like
analyzing two stories in comparison can give a better idea of the trends present in spy film at the time.

There is also the issue of government forces influencing the content of certain films, especially those which feature the military (Valantin, 2005; Alford, 2010; Lacy, 2003; Jenkins, 2013). Again, while this thesis focuses more on the created worlds that exist within film and does not touch upon the reasons why place is depicted the way it is but moreover the effect that this depiction has on the film and its themes, the tangentiality of this study means that it deserves some mention. This does not mean that I am separating the events of the film from their global context entirely; however, I am paying particular focus to one global event and its ripples through film rather than through the continued and compounding nature of global events and their effects on film. My main focus is on the results of these portrayals and interrogates the potential reasonings for their existence but pays more attention to their effects.

Methodology

Rather than use interviews and surveys to find out how people perceive these films, I am looking at the films directly as artifacts of the time in which they were created. Since I want to analyze these films and the worldviews they promote and recreate, and since measuring the effect of one type of media on people’s views of the world is near impossible, my qualitative methodology involves qualities data collection and analysis, as well as discussions on plot, dialogue, and photos from these films. I utilize close readings, critical image analysis, and discourse analysis to figure out the geopolitical themes that these films communicate and how they communicate them.
In determining my methodology, I consulted other works on popular geopolitics, drawing most heavily upon Jason Dittmer’s 2005 analysis of post-9/11 superhero comic books, which presents the historical setting of these comics’ creation, references other scholarly works about similar themes, and presents plenty of still images with dialogue included. I decided to structure my data presentation in a similar way, including quotes and frames from the films, in order to draw attention to specific case studies that exemplify the themes that I found to be present.

I have selected the 10 films that have been released from the James Bond and Mission: Impossible franchises since September 11, 2001. These include six Bond films and four Mission: Impossible films:

**Bond Films**

*Casino Royale* (2006, dir. Martin Campbell)
*Quantum of Solace* (2008, dir. Marc Forster)
*Skyfall* (2012, dir. Sam Mendes)
*Spectre* (2015, dir. Sam Mendes)
*No Time to Die* (2021, dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga)

**Mission: Impossible Films**

I selected these films based on their belonging to the two franchises which I have chosen to study (as explained in my introduction) and their release dates. Since I am focused on the post-9/11 geopolitical imagination, I limit my close analysis to these 10 films, though I occasionally draw upon the previous installments in the franchises to add additional context if necessary and to compare these later entries against.

I first watched each of these films all the way through, taking notes about geopolitical themes or locations that I found to be interesting or significant. I based this significance on the relation of these places and themes to real-world events or if they differed widely from these real-world events or just how the world works in general. After these initial viewings, I compiled my notes and grouped them into three major thematic categories based on their prevalence and their relevance in the franchise. I also noted which scenes or lines of dialogue that I had referenced in my notes might provide useful information after a closer analysis. I then went through these selected scenes, taking detailed observations of locations portrayed, dialogue, framing, music, and the political themes, paying special attention to any mentions of threats.

The three analysis methods I work with consist of case studies, critical image analysis, and discourse analysis, each of which are interrelated to provide a qualitative reading of these films as text. My research first consists of close readings of these specific films. I use a text-centered approach, which, in contrast to a reader-centered approach which prioritizes studying the audience and consumption of film, “analyzes the construction of meaning within the film’s diegesis and mise-en-scène” (Sharp & Lukinbeal, 2015, p. 21). This text-centered approach is typically used in studies of popular geopolitics, which “is about the transformation of geopolitics and ideologies through media into texts for public consumption [...]” (Harby, 2018, p. 2).
However, this emphasis on “text” does not exclude the purpose that images include. To be summed up by Lukinbeal and Sommerlad (2022): “While the importance of meaning construction through narration remains, meaning must now be positioned with a context of what images do and how they do it” (p. S2). In these case studies, I pay attention not just to the films as written text, but as text that includes the dialogue and images together. This means that, besides paying attention to themes and plot lines, I must also look at images. I applied a critical image analysis framework to these films. Critical image analysis elevates the social effects of visuals (Rose, 2012, p. 40), which led me to consider both the functional purpose of each scene’s visuals but also the deeper geopolitical messages that are communicated through this image.

I also draw upon discourse analysis alongside these text-based methods. The main form of discourse analysis that I use is discourse analysis I, which Rose (2012) describes as an analysis concerned with the “notion of discourse as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts” (p.195). This method looks at “how images construct specific views of the social world” (Rose, 2012, p. 195), a tool particularly useful when studying the audiovisual medium of film. John A. Bateman’s work on using critical discourse analysis on film (2017) also references the power of discourse analysis to point out “thematic configurations” relevant to real-world events, directly referencing post-9/11 films and the rise of “themes of security” (pp. 797-798). Bateman (2017) writes that this type of discourse analysis can include comparisons between different films with similar themes (p. 799), making this method of analysis perfect for analyzing the post-9/11 themes in my 10 selected films.

Discourse analysis is a common tool in the study of popular geopolitics (Sharp, 1993; Mostafanezhad & Promburom, 2016; Grayson, 2018; Mostafanezhad et al., 2018; Risager, 2021) because its focus on investigating “power and authority” in sources is directly related to
geopolitics and the abstract construction of world powers (Dittmer & Bos, 2019, p. 56). This analysis has also been directly used to interrogate post-9/11 media, such as through Andrew Boulton’s thematic analysis of post-9/11 country music (2008) or Bahaa-Eddin M. Mazid’s work on political cartoons depicting Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush (2008). Here, I use discourse analysis to examine the ways in which these films express meaning through their visuals and themes before then discussing the significance of these themes in my analysis chapters.

My analysis is comprised of these common themes that I found to be visible throughout multiple films, and each chapter includes case study scenes that are closely analyzed. Some of these case studies involve looking at the visuals of a particular scene, some involve a close reading of the dialogue that a specific character uses to describe a threat, and still others combine the two together. I present these case studies as examples in which these films either recreate or reimagine events that happen in the real world, thus playing a central part in the formation of popular geopolitics.

My first analysis chapter focuses on the reaction of these franchises to the events of September 11th and the threats that appear in the films. I look at the first films released after the attacks as well as subsequent films that touch on an “attack at home,” a common anxiety of the time. My second analysis chapter looks at some of the less novel threats that popped up in these films, namely the role of Russia and nuclear destruction (which are not mutually exclusive) in these films. My third and final analysis chapter touches on some of the lasting legacies of the post-9/11 worldview in spy film, paying close attention to the shared plot point of “global terror groups” meddling in world affairs.
Chapter Three: Immediate and Indirect Reactions

“In this political and social climate, the spy film, in which paranoia is always justified, was bound to thrive.”

- Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, 2011, p. 111

The impacts of current events on film can take a while to become evident. However, it is useful to examine both the most immediate reactions to the post-9/11 world to see what ideas might have been most prevalent or palatable at the time, as well as the later references that show a more developed understanding of what the attacks meant for national and international security. This chapter first looks at the two films released the soonest after the 9/11 attacks, that being 2002’s James Bond film *Die Another Day* and 2006’s *Mission: Impossible III*. In analyzing these films, I paid specific attention to the entities portrayed as “threats” and who and where exactly they are seen to be threatening. After analyzing these two films, I reference how later films in the Bond franchise comment upon and reproduce the imagery of 9/11. I argue that while it took some time for films to move from their Cold War-centered tropes, as the reality of the post-9/11 situation sank in, these films leaned into the fear and murkiness inherent to the era. However, all of these films embody an Anglo-American view of the world, portraying Western forces as the only thing standing in the way of another attack of even greater significance.

*Die Another Day*: Change is Slow Going

At first glance, *Die Another Day* doesn’t seem to fit in with the rest of the films studied in this thesis. Where the other films are semi-serious, occasionally dark and gritty takes on the characters that audiences have come to know and love who are placed in this new changed
world, the 2002 Bond installment is goofy and even more improbable. However, the film has been constantly studied in terms of its relationship with geopolitics, namely in its choice of enemy. In this section, I describe the film and closely analyze some sequences before bringing in historical context from when the film was made.

This film sees Pierce Brosnan in his fourth and final appearance as James Bond, after playing the role in *GoldenEye* (1995), *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), and *The World Is Not Enough* (1999). Brosnan is the definitive post-Cold War Bond, while Daniel Craig taking up the role seems to signify a shift in the series from outlandish antics to more grounded threats. In *Die Another Day*, however, the threat lies in a satellite mirror in outer space that can redirect the sun’s energy into a certain place. The villain is a North Korean general who has undergone DNA replacement therapy to take on the visage of Gustav Graves (Toby Stephens), a wealthy man who discovered a diamond mine a year previously. Bond remarks that the diamonds, presumably found in Iceland, resemble “African conflict diamonds,” giving him a sign that all may not be as it seems. Graves, the new persona of Colonel Moon (Will Yun Lee), is a swaggering billionaire who is, as admitted in the movie, modelled after James Bond. This enemy is interested in reunifying Korea by destroying the demilitarized zone, with plans to “squash Japan like a bug” afterwards. As is expected, this film heavily references the Korean War and the then-current state of world powers.

Multiple sources (Chung, 2020; Kord & Krimmer, 2011) link the 2002 Bond film *Die Another Day* to President George W. Bush’s January 2002 State of the Union speech in which he calls North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, constituents of “an axis of evil” (2002). When the writing team met to discuss the script, producer Barbara Broccoli advised them to consider: “What is the world worried about, now or in the next couple of years? And what is James Bond’s
position in that arena?” (Field & Chowdhury, 2018, p. 386) Interviews with the cast and crew of the film mentions that the team was inspired by Bill Clinton’s 1993 comment (Stewart, 2010) that the Demilitarized Zone was the “scariest place on Earth” (Field & Chowdhury, 2018, p. 386). Even before the events of 9/11, the filmmakers were interested in tapping into existing geopolitical fears in the Americas and Britain. This influence of the events of 9/11 would become more evident in films that were put into production longer after the attacks, but Die Another Day exists in the middle ground between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, taking inspiration from both (if not equally) and showing the lack of sureness with which to proceed with these existing spy franchises.

Die Another Day begins with James Bond (Brosnan) and two unnamed agents making their way into North Korea through surfing onto the beach. As the scene is set during nighttime, it makes sense that the beach itself would not be well-lit, but the dark colors in connection with the barbed wire and patrolling soldiers on the beach immediately contrast with the natural environment. Bond and team make it onto a helicopter, taking the place of a businessman with a briefcase full of diamonds that was set to be exchanged for weaponry. Bond lands and meets with Colonel Moon and his second in command, Zao (Rick Yune) under the guise of trading the diamonds for weapons. Soon after, Bond’s identity is revealed and he flees quickly, riding across the Demilitarized Zone in hovering vehicles to avoid the landmines. Colonel Moon is supposedly dead after he goes over a waterfall, and Zao is left permanently disfigured after the briefcase full of diamonds explodes, with a few diamonds implanted in his face.
Through text on the screen, the below compound is designated as “Colonel Tan-Sun Moon’s H. Q., De-Militarized Zone, North Korea” (commas added). As seen in the screengrab, the environment is gray and dreary, with plenty of deterrence materials and soldiers. The booming score ends on a minor key here to connote the fact that this area is meant to be seen not as a pinnacle of military achievement but as a threat to the world. For the film, this is not a hospitable environment for anything besides warmongering.
Before the deal goes south, Bond and Moon’s discussion of payment reveals Moon’s characterization and motives.

Bond: “My African ministry friends owe you many thanks, Colonel Moon. Few men have the guts to trade conflict diamonds since the U.N. embargo.”

Moon: “I know all about the UN. I studied at Oxford and Harvard. Majored in Western hypocrisy.” (Tamahori, 2002, 0:05:01)

Conflict diamonds, or diamonds that come from unrecognized governments and help fund their upkeep (Briggs, 2003), are a small sidenote in the film but add to the negative portrayal of this rogue North Korean colonel. Moon is consistently portrayed as a stereotype, one who hates America and its actions during the Korean War. He calls the landmines in the Demilitarized Zone “America’s cultural contribution” (0:05:51), derides Bond and England’s attempts to defeat him as the country’s desire to police the world, and wants to unify Korea through force in order to stand up to the West.

Notably, Moon’s father — the higher-ranking official — disagrees with his son’s plans. Instead of having the country itself portrayed as a dictatorship, *Die Another Day* posits that North Korea itself is not bad, but if the wrong person is in charge, disastrous consequences could occur. Moon’s father does not have much better things to say about American and British relations with North Korea, stating that “we cannot trust the West” (00:18:57), yet he disagrees with the dramatic methods that his son uses. This is not a nuanced portrayal of conflict by any means, but placing the blame on an individual rather than an entire country is a hallmark of the spy genre (Kord & Krimmer, 2011).

The nature of “rogue agents” in media depends on who is telling the story. Much spy media portrays “go-it-alone heroes as opposed to institutional solutions based on cooperation and
the exchange of information” (Kord & Krimmer, 2011, p. 112), and the audience is meant to praise the hero for overcoming any administrative obstacles in its way. However, when the villain goes overboard while fighting against one’s country, we are meant to deride them because they are fighting against our hero (plus acting without regard for human life, but in comparing Bond and Moon here, they both disobey the orders put upon them in their desire to do what is best for their country). This hammers home the framing of geopolitical issues in the popular imagination. There is a hero and a villain, and we are meant to sympathize with the hero — in the case of this thesis, the American or British agent following a hunch that turns out to be correct.

There were protests against the film in South Korea, with citizens critiquing “the film’s foregrounding of North Korea as a high-tech rogue state and its problematic portrayal of South Korea as a provincial backdrop under U.S. military control” (Chung, 2020, p. 132). Of particular contention was a line from NSA officer Damian Falco (Michael Madsen), who “barks out the order to ‘mobilize the South Korean troops’” (Chung, 2020, p. 144). The line implies a hierarchy in which the United States can control South Korean troops on South Korea’s own territory, and which was heavily questioned by Korean audiences. Chung’s 2020 analysis of Die Another Day through the perspectives of the South Korean moviegoing population and the history of media relations between South Korea and the United States gives a thorough account of why these protests took place.

The ending of the film also brings up the question of what and who can be destroyed. According to interviews with the cast and crew, a version of the script discussed on September 11th before the attacks had the climax — in this movie, a space mirror blowing up the Demilitarized Zone and Bond and Jinx having to escape a falling airplane — set in Manhattan in
New York City (Field & Chowdhury, 2018, p. 387). This is similar to what happened with many films in production during or closely after the attacks. As previously mentioned, the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Collateral Damage*, which was set to be released on October 5th, 2001, was edited down and pushed back until February 2002 because the plot centered around a terrorist attack in New York (Pollard, 2011, pp. 8-9).

The decision to “[pull] the destruction out into the countryside, minefields and the Demilitarized Zone” (Field & Chowdhury, 2018, p. 387), in the words of Tamahori, shows that there was an unwillingness to touch destruction of “highly-settled” areas in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. However, the sensitivity with which the directors and screenwriters treated New York after 9/11 did not apply to all locations equally. In the world that the filmmakers have created, the Korean Demilitarized Zone is seen as more disposable than New York City. From a cold logical standpoint, this makes sense: the American filmgoing audience is going to be less affected by destruction in an unpopulated area across the globe than by a reminder of something that is ever present in their minds just a year later. The change begs the question, though, of which locations are seen as expendable or appropriate areas for large-scale conflict in film. Whose voices matter? In this case, the voices with the most recent tragedy win out, but a precedent is maintained that those with power — especially at the box office — can shape fictional worlds in their preferred image.

Dodds’ 2006 work researching audience reactions to *Die Another Day* through entries on the Internet User Database and contemporary reviews of the film has a robust description of why the film is ripe for studying compared to other spy films of the time. Along with the high number of discussion posts made on the IMDb about the film, Dodds cited *Die Another Day*’s depiction of antagonism between North Korea and the United States that was present in the real world
In the same work, Dodds references the presence of the United States in the film and its administrative clash with MI6 (2006).

*Die Another Day* feels disconnected from the other Bond films in this analysis, partly because of its shift in tone and its change of lead actor, but also because it was released so soon after 9/11 and was less of a processed response to the events than a film that had to change and adapt due to “necessity.” I believe that the filmmakers did not have enough time to think about what spying would mean in the post-9/11 era and what kind of enemies people had moved on to thinking about. While this case study provides interesting geopolitical ramifications in its effects on South Korea and raises questions about which places are “allowed” to be destroyed (and who filmmakers are primed to consider when choosing these places of destruction), does not fit in to the rest of my post-9/11 analysis and perhaps shows that the proximity of these films to events like 9/11 may not be a good indicator of their themes. The next slate of these franchises’ films both came out in 2006 and are remarkably similar in their dark and serious tone, with *Mission: Impossible III* acting as a departure from the rest of the films preceding and following it, and *Casino Royale* marking the sustained tone shift of the Bond franchise.

*Mission: Impossible III: Facing the New World*

*Mission: Impossible III* (2006) was the first film in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise after the events of 9/11. Due to scheduling issues and cast and crew departing from the project, there was a six-year gap in between the two films (Chitwood, 2001). Though this delay is not attributable to 9/11, it did mean that the world had already been living in a post-attack world for some time, and the film and its audiences would be in some way influenced by that normalization of certain threats. Just as spy film was starting to adapt to this post-Cold War
world, the studios had another ever-present idea come to the surface for them to play with: personal attacks. By examining the threats presented in this film and how they are portrayed, we can get a sense of the geopolitical moment in which the film was created and critique these depictions and the world they create.

Hunt’s emotional reaction to his wife being kidnapped starts off the film. In Terence McSweeney’s book *The ‘war on Terror’ and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second*, the author spends time examining *M:I III* through the lens of a new action hero model. He claims that Hunt embodies a “vulnerability” unmatched in the franchise’s two previous installments (McSweeney, 2014, p. 86). This is quite clear in the first scene, which opens with the darkest tone of perhaps any of the *Mission: Impossible* films. Impossible Mission Force agent Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) is tied up in a dingy base, his wife Julia (Michelle Monaghan) across from him with a gun pointed to her head. The man holding the gun is Owen Davian (Philip Seymour Hoffman), an arms trafficker with a host of deadly credits to his name. As Davian continually asks Ethan for the Rabbit’s Foot, an object which has not been identified to the audience yet, Ethan begins to cry at Davian’s insistent questioning. We do not know who Julia is, we do not know who Davian is and we don’t even know what the Rabbit’s Foot is, but what we do understand is the coldness with which Davian eventually fires the gun, sending the film into its famous title sequence.
The theme of this film is truly set on hitting people where it hurts personally. After the opening scene, Ethan gets a moment of respite at his engagement party in suburban Virginia with his then-fiancée Julia and her family. However, Ethan receives a coded phone call that compels him to leave the party and drive to a convenience store, where he meets fellow agent John Musgrave (Billy Crudup). Musgrave tries to convince Ethan to go back into the field for an urgent mission, revealing to the audience that in the years since *Mission: Impossible II* (2000), Ethan has been training agents rather than acting as one himself. He has left danger behind to focus on making a normal life for himself with someone he loves. The only thing that could pull him in is a threat towards someone else that he loves, which Musgrave informs him to be the case: one of Ethan’s trainees, Lindsey Farris (Keri Russell), has been captured in Germany. Ethan doesn’t verbalize his agreement straightaway, declining the offer, but picks up more information as he leaves the store. It’s too personal for Ethan to pass up, and Musgrave knows this: we find out at the film’s climax that he is working with Davian the entire time and is dependent upon Ethan’s involvement with the IMF for their plan to work.
Both this emphasis on focused personal violence and the general sentiment of people towards the 9/11 attacks can be seen as an “attack on the home”. The events of September 11th amplified the world’s general fears that the people or values they love are at constant risk of being attacked. “Why did we perceive an assault on the urban workplace as a threat to the domestic circle?” (p. 7), Susan Faludi asks in her 2007 book *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9-11 America*, in which she examines the influence of the attacks on Americans’ views of threats. Amy Kaplan (2003) writes that after the 9/11 attacks, words such as “homeland” — most prominent in the name of the Department of Homeland Security, which was created shortly after the attacks — connote “comforting images of a deeply rooted past to legitimate modern forms of imperial power” (p. 90). Scholars like Kaplan and Tasker (2012), who writes about the portrayal of homeland security on television crime dramas, use the term “homeland” to point towards a demonization of the “foreign” or “other.” Following that line of thinking, the vilification of this “other” serves also to promote a fierce protectiveness of the “home” or those who constitute it, like family or friends. It is this that makes the sudden shift in this film make sense, where Hunt is left crying and devastated after losing his trainee and seeing his wife hurt. Terror hits home.

The audience is treated to its first real explanation of who Owen Davian is, as Musgrave speaks through a recorded message: “Details are eyes-only, but I can tell you that Davian is a black-market trafficker. Extremely dangerous, and a priority for us” (Abrams, 2006, 0:10:15). The threat is kept vague for now, but the level of attention that the American government is placing upon it is not. To find Farris, Ethan and an IMF team leave domestic Virginia for industrial Kreuzberg, Germany, which is labeled as Berlin with on-screen text but which was correctly named in a map that Ethan looks at when getting his mission details. Farris is rescued
but dies when a small explosive device in her head is detonated, leaving Ethan with the feeling that he was responsible somehow for her death.

Once the team makes it back to the United States, Davian’s exact threat level is made clearer. IMF Director Theodore Brassel (Laurence Fishburne) says this about Davian, a man that he has been trying to catch for his entire career:

Brassel: He was the one who brought gas-centrifuge technology to Korea from Pakistan. He was also the man who sold Toxin Five to the Armahad Republic Jihad. He is a man who provides, provides, provides. And he remains invisible. He’s a goddamn invisible man. (0:29:17)

These claims are fictional, but they reflect a deep-seeded fear in the public’s mind about the potential for “North Korea and Islamic fundamentalist terrorists” to attack Americans (McSweeney, 2014, p. 86). A Pew Research survey stated that one year after the attacks, “about half of [American] adults felt more afraid, more careful, more distrustful or more vulnerable as a result of the attacks” (2021). David L. Altheide (2010) claims that “[d]omestic life became oriented to celebrating/commemorating past terrorist attacks, waiting for and anticipating the next terrorist attack and taking steps to prevent it” (p. 16). There doesn’t need to be a specific group named to make the public feel threatened. Words like “Jihad” and “Toxin” and places like Korea are purposely chosen to make the audience aware that Davian is a man with evil customers, reducing these real places and people to cartoon villains.

Notably, M:I III does not define exactly what the “Rabbit’s Foot,” the biological weapon that Owen Davian is trying to sell, actually does. We are first introduced to this object when tech officer Benji (Simon Pegg) finds mention of the term in emails that Davian has sent. Benji believes it to be a code word in order to conceal the nature of the object but adds that it will be
sold to an “unspecified buyer” for the hefty sum of $850 million. Benji gives us the best explanation of what kind of threat the “Rabbit’s Foot” could be:

Benji: I used to have this professor at Oxford, okay – Dr. Wickham […] He taught biomolecular kinetics and cellular dynamics. And he used to sort of scare the underclassmen with this story about how the world would eventually be eviscerated by technology. You see, it was inevitable that a compound would be created which he referred to as the “anti-God.” It was like an accelerated mutator. You know, like a – an unstoppable force of destructive power that would just lay waste to everything – to buildings and parks and streets and children and ice cream parlors. You know? So whenever I see like a rogue organization willing to spend this amount of money on a mystery tech, I always assume it’s the anti-God. End of the world kind of stuff. You know? (Pause) But no, I don’t have any idea what it is, I was just speculating. (0:34:10)

Davian eventually uses Julia as leverage to get Ethan to steal the Rabbit’s Foot for him, and in planning the heist the team reveals that it is in a Chinese military contractor’s laboratory in Shanghai, China. After Ethan succeeds in the heist, he pulls out a high-tech vial with another container inside marked as a “biohazard”. In contrast to later films, especially *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* and *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* which both include the threat of nuclear warfare or terrorism, the threat posed by the Rabbit’s Foot is unclear. What is far more meaningful is the threat that Davian himself, or more comprehensively, Davian and Musgrave pose and the ideals they represent. McSweeney reads the two as traitorous Americans, the former loyal only to money, the latter believing that working with Davian instead of against him will let the United States profit from any damage caused (McSweeney, 2014, p. 86). While Musgrave is
nowhere near as threatening as Davian, his rationale hearkens back to what McSweeney calls “uber-patriotism” (2014, p. 86):

Musgrave: I took action, Ethan, on behalf of the working families of our country. The armed forces. The White House. I’ve had enough of Brassel and his sanctimony “IMF executive director.” He’s an affirmative action poster boy. You grabbed Davian like he wanted. Then what? Davian’s a weed. You cut him out, two more spring up just like him the next day. Arrest him? Then what? You use him, collaborate with him, and it’s Christmas.

Musgrave: In 18 hours the Rabbit’s Foot will be delivered to its Middle Eastern buyer and we’ll have credible intel to prove it. U.S. Security Council will get a report by this time tomorrow. We’re talking a military strike within a week. And when the sand settles, our country will do what it does best: clean up. Infrastructure. Democracy wins.

(1:40:21)

The quote above depicts a part of the government that is willing to destroy others for American prosperity. Despite this, though, the badness is rooted out by Ethan Hunt and is punished with death, showing that in the world of these films, causing death for profit is something evil.

Die Another Day and M:I III show wildly different reactions to the events of September 11th, 2001. This is attributable to the time difference between the films, with one releasing in 2002 and one releasing in 2006 where there was more time to consider the effects, but each film reflects and reproduces the anxieties that the culture had at the time. As time moved on, people may have grown less afraid of a direct threat from a specific country as the news of terrorism groups became widespread. Die Another Day and M:I III were the first entries in their respective series to take on the post-9/11 world, but they would not be the last.
Lasting Legacies: 9/11 in the Daniel Craig Bond Era

The 2006 Bond film *Casino Royale* served as a soft reboot for the franchise, replacing lead actor Pierce Brosnan with new face Daniel Craig in the role of James Bond. This follows the long legacy of recasting James Bond with different actors, and this change also marks a stark turn in the Bond series. Bond movies became more serious, still with some quips but mostly focused on the grit of the character and the new threats he faces. Some temporal distance from 9/11 also led to the incident being mentioned outright in the film, which follows Bond as he tries to follow Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen), a money-holder for the world’s terrorists who makes a little money on the side by causing terror attacks that will affect a company’s stock price.

The film shows us this through an associate of Le Chiffre’s attempting to blow up an airplane. While this airplane that is meant to be exploded does remain on the ground, it is regardless reminiscent of the fears that many people had after 9/11 that there were people powerful enough to bring down a plane without much resistance. After receiving a parcel of money from a Ugandan general of dubious morality, who advises him not to take any risks with the investment, Le Chiffre calls an associate and asks him to short stocks in an airplane manufacturer. The associate points out that this stock is expected to keep rising, but Le Chiffre insists, knowing all the while that he has plans for one of his men to blow up the airplane company’s new plane as it is being unveiled to the world. Bond follows the man to Miami International Airport, where the man goes through the security screeners with ease, passing off the explosive device as a keychain flashlight. Sure enough, the world of the James Bond films has evolved along with the real one, portraying both the new security screeners meant to prevent another attack from happening while also showing the audience’s fear come true: that attackers
can still make it through these screeners and, without a strong man like James Bond to stop them, will attack again.

The rest of the film provides less focus on the terrorists themselves than it does on the poker game that Le Chiffre must win to make back the money he lost on the airplane stock, one that Bond tries to prevent him from winning. However, it is the direct acknowledgement of the 9/11 attacks by name that places this film in a markedly post-9/11 world. After reconnecting with Bond, MI6 head M (Judi Dench) describes Le Chiffre (“a private banker to the world’s terrorists” (Campbell, 2006, 0:55:06)) and his dealings in world affairs:

M: When they analyzed the stock market after 9/11, the CIA discovered a massive shorting of airline stocks. When the stocks hit bottom on 9/12, somebody made a fortune. The same thing happened this morning with Skyfleet stock, or was supposed to. With their prototype destroyed, the company would be near bankruptcy. Instead, somebody lost over 100 million dollars betting the wrong way. (0:55:59)

While some scholars point to this being confirmation that Le Chiffre and associates “must have been aware of 9/11 happening the next day, and they may very well have ordered the attacks in order to manipulate the stock market” (Pollard, 2011, p. 117), I am not sure if this line is referring to this group having been a direct cause of the 9/11 attacks, or if it is trying to make a timely example of what had been planned with the earlier attack on the plane unveiling in the film. However, it does not matter much about whether the film clarifies who might have caused the real-world 9/11 attacks for financial gain (or if this happened at all), but more that the film floats the possibility that someone could have done this. It is a possibility, a real-life fear, that is now being presented as an analogy for something that happened in the fictional world of the film. I propose that spy films, however fantastical they may get, do have some footing on real-
world technologies, conflicts, and events, and the confirmation that 9/11 has happened in the world of this film makes this connection even more clear.

*Skyfall*, dir. Sam Mendes, 0:16:50

The MI6 building at Vauxhall Cross has been the on-screen home of our heroes since *GoldenEye* (1995). During *Skyfall*, the MI6 building explodes. The scene is introduced by uneasily showing MI6 head M (Judi Dench) and her chief of staff Bill Tanner (Rory Kinnear) trying to figure out the location of a hacker trying to get into the agency’s system. It is slowly revealed to us, through an ever-refreshing satellite display, that the hacker was in M’s office on her computer. This theme of the safety of not only one’s personal space but of a government’s space being compromised by bad actors directly reflects the world’s uneasiness after the 9/11 attacks. There is an invasion of privacy by a bad actor, which sets up *Spectre*’s solution of giving governments more oversight of its civilians. Even in this instance, the idea of surveillance itself is not challenged; the fact that the people who are setting up this oversight program are working with the “bad guys” is what makes this oversurveillance of the population bad.
As M and Tanner drive up to Vauxhall Cross, they are stopped by police. There is no close-up on the destruction as it happens. Instead, the audience sees the explosion over the shoulder of a police officer, taking them by surprise: we never knew that a bomb was involved in all of this. Patrick Anderson (2016) names this display of destruction as the film “mov[ing] from post-9/11 to 9/11 itself” (p. 74), comparing the building’s silhouette to the Twin Towers and bringing up the thematic shift in the film. No longer does this world have to reference the historical memory of the audience; now, the burned-out specter of the building can loom over each film as a symbol of how close the enemy has come to home. The destruction of Vauxhall Cross results in James Bond coming out of his “retirement.” M, in questioning Bond about his reason for returning, answers her own question: “Because we’re under attack. And you know we need you” (Mendes, 2012, 0:26:57). I found a parallel in this scene to a similar scene at the beginning of *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014), in which the titular character is prompted to join the U. S. military after watching the 9/11 attacks on television. Jack Ryan (Chris Pine) later joins the CIA, and there could be an entire other thesis written on the geopolitics of Jack Ryan, from the Tom Clancy novels to the many film portrayals, but I bring up this example to compare

*Skyfall, dir. Sam Mendes, 0:21:24*
Bond’s re-entering the field after tragedy to the feelings that a character might have towards fighting for their country after tragedy.

*Skyfall*, dir. Sam Mendes, 0:29:20

*Skyfall* later reveals that whoever blew up the building knew that M would not be inside, prompting Bond to observe that the explosion was not targeting M, but rather that “They wanted her to see it” (0:28:26). This part relates to the spectacle that the attacks on the Twin Towers provided and relates the destruction of MI6 as something that was meant to cause more fear than death. MI6 having to move underground — quite literally — into the very tunnels used by Winston Churchill and the British government during World War II (shown above, in their strange, reclaimed glory) embodies their response to such a symbolic act: if the enemy will invoke images of total war, so will the “heroes.”

This chapter tracked each franchise’s direct response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks before looking at the James Bond franchise’s portrayal of the attacks with increased scrutiny as the films demanded. While *Die Another Day* did not have many story elements with any relation or reference to the attacks, *Mission: Impossible III’s* depiction of a villain selling weapons to any
group that might want them, along with its themes of “attacks on the home,” show that over time, these franchises reacted to the changing world that their audiences were now living in. This darker, more serious tone carried over to the later Bond films as there was enough time to process the attacks and figure out how each story would deal with them. Having tracked the events themselves across the film franchises, I now turn to some of my other observations on the films, most pressingly the remaining dependence on Cold War-era threats and geopolitical shorthand.
Chapter Four: Cold War Holdovers and Evolutions

In this chapter, I examine some of the tropes and fears that carry over from films about the Cold War into more recent cinema. These fears are split into two groups: specific places or governments that take on new meanings, and specific methods of destruction that originated in the Cold War period and are less baked-in to the American psyche but are still referenced heavily. In my discussion on depictions of place, I focus particularly on the depiction of modern-day Russia, Latin America and the Caribbean as locations viewed through the lens of being somewhat removed from the Cold War and applying new visions of America’s power and the threats that act upon it. In discussing the fear of nuclear annihilation, I think about how these threats have slightly evolved from fears commonly present in Cold War-era spy media, but that they have stark similarities. Throughout my analysis, I keep in mind that these films tell the story of a Western agent acting in service of the state and its people, and I propose that we can then read these films as an endorsement of these tactics and worldviews in the name of the state unless explicitly pointed out by the script. In conclusion, I focus on the lasting influence of masculine, Western, white hegemony over the rest of the world when acting in the name of the “State” and the authority they suppose over landscapes.

Old Battlegrounds

While this thesis does not deal primarily with the immediate post-Cold War period and the developments throughout, I wanted to look at some of the depictions of Cold War locations of note in the years after 9/11. In examining this, I found that these places of note were still prevalent in spy films, with historical ties to their Cold War usages but with specific updates.
Russia

The six James Bond films that I studied did not make much, if any, mention of the Russian government. This is a marked departure from the first Bond movie after the Cold War, *GoldenEye* (1995), wherein a rogue British agent (Sean Bean) works with a Russian general to activate an electro-magnetic pulse over Britain. Many pains are made to state that the Russian government itself is not at fault in the plot, rather, that a few bad state actors (led by a British outsider, who identifies with his Cossack heritage) are the only support that this plan has. While the scope of this thesis does not include the events of *GoldenEye* themselves, the absence of Russia in the most recent Bond films is made even more visible when comparing these newer films to one that did not come out very long ago.

The same cannot be said for the *Mission: Impossible* series, and specifically the 2011 film *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol*, which initiates its events with the explosion of the Kremlin (or, the Russian center of government). At the beginning of the film, an IMF team breaks Ethan Hunt out of a prison in Moscow, Russia, where he has been undercover looking for “an emerging extremist” with the code name Cobalt who is “determined to detonate a nuclear weapon however he can” (Bird, 2011, 0:17:17). Hunt and the team learn that Cobalt “is or was a Level One nuclear strategist for Russian intelligence” (0:18:23), placing this extremist as having some relation to the Russian government. The film later specifies that the larger Russian government has no current affiliation with Cobalt, but after Cobalt blows up the Kremlin (pictured below) and blames it on Hunt and his team, Russian agents pursue them as if they were the enemy.
Hunt protests that he needs to tell the Russian government that one of their agents is acting out of line, still keeping the blame off of the Russian government itself and instead placing it on this one bad actor. The secretary of the IMF tells Ethan that the United States government has completely derecognized the organization, since “As far as the Russians are concerned, we just bombed the Kremlin. The tension between the United States and Russia hasn’t been this high since the Cuban Missile Crisis. And the blame, right or wrong, points to IMF” (0:40:25). The center of the conflict here is that the IMF and, by proxy, the United States, is being framed for inciting an attack against Russia. This ends up being exactly what Cobalt, the code name for Swedish nuclear strategist Kurt Hendricks (Michael Nyqvist), wants to happen. Later in the film, Hendricks’ plan is revealed: he thinks that a nuclear war with equally, mutually assured destruction will provide global peace, and to achieve this, he plans to send a Russian nuclear missile to the United States. In doing so, he expects the United States to retaliate, kicking off a global conflict.
The latter part of this chapter deals with the specifics of the nuclear threat, but this section looks at the significance of choosing the United States and Russia as the false instigators. The easiest explanation is that *Ghost Protocol* is an American film made for American audiences, and having the United States as a central character is an easy way to incorporate this home audience into the film. However, the in-film references to Cold War events like the Cuban Missile Crisis show that basing a fictional conflict on a real one. As previously quoted, Upton (2014) writes that “international intrigue […] could no longer simply rely on the East against West trope during the post-Cold War era (p. 13). I partially agree with this statement, but I think that the answer for some films was to make the East against West trope just a slight bit more complicated, rather than to turn it on its head completely. *Ghost Protocol* has Hunt fighting against the Russian government by proxy, as they believe he is responsible for the attacks, but there is no blame placed on either side of the conflict other than on Hendricks/Cobalt himself.

The presence of Russia in *Ghost Protocol* alludes to past tensions between the United States and Russia, but these concerns are quickly squashed at the end of the film when the Russian secret agents chasing Hunt and his team realize that he was trying to stop the attacks all along (pictured below). The lead Russian agent (played by Vladimir Mashkov) says to Ethan, “So. We are not enemies” (1:58:54), resolving the tension as little more than a misunderstanding. The Russian agents in this film are not portrayed as a threat, but more as a hinderance to the IMF team’s main goal of stopping Hendricks. This is a marked departure from the Cold War standard of “East bad, West good,” but it does still play upon the trope of Russian-U.S. conflict in which the United States is still in the right and the Russian agents are the ones who are misunderstanding the situation, still placing the blame upon them and their government.
Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean have been areas of ideological dispute since the Cold War (Dominguez, 1999). Jean-Claude Gerlus (1995) proposes that after the Cuban Revolution, the United States was prone to allow authoritarian governments in Haiti rather than let the country “fall” to communism (p. 34). These themes appear consistent with the portrayal of Latin America and the Caribbean in these spy films, each of which serve to support the United States or United Kingdom security services and their interests.

I begin by looking at the depiction of Haiti in the 2008 Bond film Quantum of Solace. After analyzing this framework, I use this lens to compare the depictions of Cuba in the Bond films Die Another Day and No Time to Die. These films were released in 2002 and 2021, respectively, so I can compare these portrayals over a wider time range. In this analysis, Haiti seems to be portrayed more as a force that is being acted upon by different interests, while Cuba is seen as a completely functional area that nevertheless is still exploited.
*Quantum of Solace* deals most directly with the theme of post-imperial (or neo-imperial) countries having power over others and exploiting them for their own gain. Bond investigates environmentalist Dominic Greene (Mathieu Amalric), a man who is secretly working as part of the global network Quantum to consolidate power over the world’s water resources and exploit this control for their own profit. In Haiti, Greene explains his method of business with General Madrano, a Bolivian military leader who is trying to seize power.

Greene: Well, look at what we did to *this* country. The Haitians elect a priest who decides to raise the minimum wage from 38 cents to one dollar a day…

Madrano: Whoa.

Greene: It’s not a lot, but it’s enough to upset the corporations who were here making T-shirts and running shoes. So they called us, and we facilitated a change. (0:26:30)

This conversation portrays Haiti as a nation that is acted upon, not as one that acts on its own. However, the consequences in the conversation go further. In creating Quantum, the organization that helped make this transition of power happen, *Quantum of Solace* takes the real-world threat of corporations influencing policy for financial gain and turns it into a fake group that has ultimate power. Instead of corporations turning to politicians for influence, they turn to a middleman group that will secretly help them get their way. I find this creation interesting, as it ascribes blame to a fictional entity rather than the real-world stakeholders exerting power over these countries.

Continuing the conversation from earlier, Greene describes how he will help Madrano get back into power:

Madrano: The difference is, my country’s not some flyspeck in the middle of the Caribbean.
Greene: But we’ve already begun destabilizing the government. We’ll supply the private security. We’ll pay off the right officials, and we have twenty-six countries ready to officially recognize your new Bolivian government. You want your country back. My organization can give it to you within the week. (0:26:54)

Bolivia does not escape Greene’s and Quantum’s exploitation, as later in the film, Greene utilizes his knowledge of water rights (and his damming up of the waterways) on a small parcel of Bolivian land to pressure Madrano into paying him for water use. Of course, James Bond swoops in to save the day and both Greene and Madrano die, but this betrayal of Madrano by Greene shows the ultimate power that these external groups have over even dictators. Greene knows that he is exploiting all these countries, even poking fun at the idea when discussing it with CIA agents (who are completely on board with the plan to hand Bolivia to Madrano by allowing a coup, though they do not know Greene’s true intentions of pursuing water rights):

Greene: Venezuela, Brazil, now Bolivia. With you tied up in the Middle East, South America is falling like dominoes. You don’t need another Marxist giving national resources to the people, do you? (0:37:08)

This complicates the narrative a bit, as the United States is shown acting in accordance with Greene’s plans to exploit Bolivia and placing blame on this real-world government. The British government is caught up in this plan as well, with a minister saying that they are willing to work with Greene in order to secure oil rights because “If we refused to do business with villains, we’d have almost no one to trade with” (1:12:06). However, the U.S. and U.K. are shown to be exploited by Greene as well, as they are under the opinion that he will help provide them oil that does not exist. Additionally, at the end of the film, the American agent who is supportive of working with Greene is demoted and the “good” agent Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright) takes his
position. By resolving the situation of corruption through the government regulating itself, these films can simultaneously point out the possibility for internal government corruption but also the idea that the people in charge will ensure that this behavior is punished.

In the world of *Quantum of Solace*, the Latin America and the Caribbean are places which are acted upon by other, more powerful state interests. Whether these interests belong to the United States or the less realistic Quantum, they are still continuing the exploitation of these places that was present during and before the Cold War.

In contrast to this portrayal of the Caribbean, other Bond films portray Cuba as a stable state that is nevertheless utilized by U.K. forces to promote their own goals. In the films I studied, Cuba is first brought up in *Die Another Day* as Bond tries to find where Colonel Moon’s right-hand man Zao has disappeared to. Bond travels to Havana, Cuba, where he walks by people dancing and taking photos by the water. The island is portrayed with high, jovial energy, which is aided by the upbeat music that accompanies this introduction of the country.

*Die Another Day*, dir. Lee Tamahori, 0:30:57
On his way to meet a contact, Bond walks through a darkly-lit cigar factory where the camera holds on a man reading out the newspaper to the factory workers (pictured below). This seems to portray the Cuban working class as radically different from what the filmmaker thinks the audience would think is a “normal” working environment. There is an “othering” here through the emphasis on politics and labor that gives viewers a sense that Cuban factories might all be like this, not giving the audience much more to go on. However, Cuba is not portrayed as a destitute nation but rather a thriving one, though still one that large imperial governments are still able to use for their own interests.

*Die Another Day*, dir. Lee Tamahori, 0:32:01

Bond eventually meets with his contact Raoul (Emilio Echevarría), and the two converse, making scant remarks on the political situation of Cuba. After Bond tells him that he is looking for a terrorist, Raoul says, “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” (Tamahori, 2002, 0:33:11), prompting Bond to explain that Zao is not interested in providing people freedom. Raoul helps Bond locate Zao, who is at an experimental hospital off the coast, and remarks that “We may have lost our freedom in the revolution but … we have a health system
second to none” (0:33:58). Bond then pokes fun at Raoul’s wealthiness: “Well, you don’t seem to have done too badly out of the revolution” (0:34:05).

This conversation provides a Eurocentric depiction of Cuba through showing the audience this conversation from Bond’s perspective, where Bond counters Raoul’s praises with snappy comebacks. Cuba is still seen as a place that the United Kingdom has a foothold in, or at least is allowed to act there without retribution in the name of protecting “global” interests — these interests, of course, as dictated by the British government. However, Cuba is not described with the same language of exploitation as Haiti is in Quantum of Solace; the imperialism here is more implicit than explicit.

Bond once again visits Cuba in the most recent film, No Time to Die (2021). This time, Bond (played by Daniel Craig) is tasked with finding a kidnapped scientist in Santiago de Cuba. In contrast to the depiction in Die Another Day, this film’s Cuba is completely sanitized from any kind of political commentary. This could be due to the purpose of the scenes: in No Time to Die, Cuba is only a backdrop for Bond and CIA agent Paloma (Ana de Armas) to infiltrate a group meeting and make a daring escape, whereas in Die Another Day the trip to Cuba features a less action-packed scene where Bond finds information from a willing source. Though some action comes later in Die Another Day, it is completely unrelated to this location, and No Time to Die includes no such scene commenting on the political situation of Cuba.

No Time to Die depicts Cuba with little agency, other than a brief attempt by the police force to stop another British agent from leaving a crime scene. Instead, Cuba is once again just a backdrop for the larger forces of MI6, the CIA, and the villain group (known as Spectre) to battle on. This evolution of Cuba’s portrayal could be reflective of a changing popular attitude in Cuba,
perhaps because this film was made much later after the Cold War and fears of Communism were not the first thing on people’s minds when thinking of the island.

After examining the depiction of Latin America and the Caribbean in these three Bond films, I would be remiss to leave out the (however brief) depiction of Havana, Cuba in the fifth *M:I* film, *Rogue Nation*, released in 2015. This scene is an interesting example of what César Albarrán-Torres (2021) calls “chromatic othering,” which includes “stylistic choices” in filming the Global South like “the representation of geographical space from above” or “the depiction of Global South locations with rusty hues and grainy film” (p. 107). Albarrán-Torres’ work focuses on the portrayal of cartels in film and television, and he explores the use of this framing in context with the real-world politics and views of cartels to “exoticise the Other, justify U.S. interventionism in fictional narratives and represent geopolitical space and foreign cultures in a way that creates and perpetuates stereotypes about Latin America, its governments and people” (2021 p. 107). I included the frame below from *Spectre*’s Mexico City scene as an example of straightforward “chromatic othering” in these films. The scene in *Rogue Nation* that I am about to describe plays on audience assumptions about the “chromatic othering” being used, but while it somewhat subverts this othering, it still does not resolve that this othering is incorrect or should not be used.
The scene only takes up about two minutes of the film’s 131-minute runtime and does not even show much of Cuba itself. To give context to the scene, Hunt has just escaped from being kidnapped by someone related to the Syndicate, an international terror group that I will expand upon in the next chapter. Hunt calls Agent William Brandt (Jeremy Renner) at the IMF for help, only to learn that the team has been shut down after his previous mishaps in Russia and his proximity for creating disaster. Instead of turning himself in, as he is now working without the sponsorship of an agency, Hunt flees to continue searching for more information about the Syndicate. After Brandt hangs up, he tells CIA Director Alan Hunley (Alec Baldwin), who led the charge to shut down the IMF, that he has no idea where Hunt has gone. This scene sets up the cut to the shot of Cuba: as Hunley says that “Ethan Hunt is living his last day as a free man” (0:20:40), we suddenly jump to an overhead shot of the city of Havana, Cuba, with text on the screen reading “Six Months Later.” This shot of Havana, as we are told shortly after of the city’s name, centers the city’s buildings rather than its beaches, though the ocean is visible off to the right side of the frame. These buildings are awash in yellow, red, and white, and many of them are low to the ground.
The scene in Havana cuts between shots of Hunt working out in a dingy, dark apartment; shots of Hunley and Brandt in CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, giving orders for Hunt’s capture; and a CIA team in Havana trying to break into the apartment and find Hunt. Both the CIA team and Hunt are shot with a yellowish, dusty sheen, as seen in the images below. Hunt is lit only by sunlight coming through the window, giving a yellow glare to the scene. As the team rushes into what appear to be Hunt’s apartment building, they are again lit mostly by the yellow sunlight from outside, with the dominant color of the frame still being that dusky yellow.
This entire scene is actually a misdirect for both the audience and for Hunley and Brandt, as it is revealed that Hunt is actually in Paris. The Havana apartment is full of evidence that Hunt has been collecting on the Syndicate, showing that Hunt purposely led the team there to get this information to the U.S. government without putting himself in danger. The audience is tricked into thinking that Hunt is currently in Cuba because of these quick edits (communications
researcher Charles R. Acland (2020) points out the “magic of international movement” as the “three different locations connect” (p. 79), which portrays a false view of the ease and speed of travel and communication to the audience) and because of the similar color-tones of the locations.

Drawing back to Albarrán-Torres’ work, which focuses on the contrast between how each side of the United States-Mexico border is portrayed (2021), I think that this scene is meant to showcase how when different locations are filmed in the same way, they are treated equally. When the camera turns to show Paris, this “chromatic othering” is still used, but with the landmark of the Eiffel Tower in view we are able to create our perception of the area with more than just the main coloring of the screen. The portrayal of Cuba in Rogue Nation is not an apolitical depiction, as no filmed depiction of a place exists in a vacuum without the influence (conscious or unconscious) of human bias. After viewing all of the M:I films for this project, it is striking to see how little they choose to portray Latin America or the Caribbean. In fact, looking at my notes on each film’s featured locations, the James Bond films show places south of the contiguous United States much more than the M:I films do, with four of the six Bond films I
studied including significant scenes set in Latin America or the Caribbean (*Skyfall* being one of the understandable exceptions along with *Casino Royale*, as most of the former is set in England and thematically linked with the attack on Vauxhall Cross). It is not clear why this lapse in portrayal exists, but the effect is that the *M:I* series stays away from targeted political references to Latin American and Caribbean exploitation and thus characterizes all of its threats as being more Euro- or US-centric.

**Shifting Nuclear Fears**

In this section, I want to examine the evolution of nuclear threats portrayed in the *Mission: Impossible* films. Both the fourth and the sixth film in the series deal with a nuclear plot, but they have specifically different versions of this threat that point towards people’s changing fears of nuclear attacks. I use these examples to argue that these films play upon Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation with a twist, and that they update these fears for current audiences.

The nuclear threat in *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol* (2011) is blatantly tied to Cold War fears of mutually assured destruction. As mentioned previously in this chapter, villain Kurt Hendricks is trying to possess and launch a nuclear weapon. During the film, he explains his rationale at a meeting of world leaders:

Hendricks (translated): How will the world finally end? It is my job to predict the unthinkable. To treat the death of billions as a game. After twenty years of this, I was numb. Until a new question crossed my mind. What happens *after* the end of the world? Every two or three million years, some natural catastrophe devastates all life on Earth. But life goes on. And what little remains is made stronger. Put simply, world destruction
is an unpleasant but necessary part of evolution. What happens then, I wondered, when mankind faces the next end of the world? I looked to Hiroshima, Nagasaki… thriving cities rebuilt from the ashes, monuments to the unimaginable, dedicated to the concept of peace. It occurred to me here that nuclear war might have a place in the natural order. But only if it could be controlled. Only if it touched every living soul equally. (0:47:12)

Hendricks’ plan is to destroy the entire world equally in order for the world to enter a new age of peace. The emphasis here is on equality of destruction: Hendricks does not want to leave any area untouched. During the Cold War, fears of nuclear destruction ran rampant (Fiske et al., 1983; Jacobs, 2007), and this imagery and anxiety found its way into film (Rogin, 1988; Perrine, 1998). In *Ghost Protocol*, these fears are being realized, but through completely different ideological means. Instead of a war between Russia and the United States that is started by governments making a balanced decision, this is instead a cautionary tale of what can happen if one bad person gets their hands on a nuclear weapon and has enough knowledge to cause the most damage.

This method of destruction is also based upon the Cold War adage of mutually assured destruction. When kicking off his plan, Hendricks says, “We’ll fire just one missile, an apparent retaliation for the Kremlin. That should start the ball rolling” (1:48:53). He is counting on the retaliation of the United States and subsequently Russia, thus making the biggest fear of the Cold War a reality. This nuclear threat is an interesting play on Cold War themes because it uses the war’s tensions as a cover-up for the actual plan, motivated by ideology which has nothing to do with the specific countries involved. However, the method of this attack is dependent on the tensions between these two large countries and the tension that launching a nuclear missile would create, thus placing this film fully within the context of the Cold War.
The nuclear threat in *Mission: Impossible — Fallout* (2018), however, does not deal with the destruction of the entire world, or even the destruction of major cities, despite the IMF’s predictions that the stolen nuclear bomb materials could be used to kill “countless millions” (McQuarrie, 2018, 0:04:27) when communicating this information to Ethan. The below graphics are shown to Ethan as potential attack sites, initially setting up the threat that nuclear weapons could have on highly populated cities.

*Mission: Impossible — Fallout*, dir. Christopher McQuarrie, 0:04:25

*Mission: Impossible — Fallout*, dir. Christopher McQuarrie, 0:04:26
Instead, the villain, August Walker (Henry Cavill), plans to detonate nuclear weapons in what the film describes as “Indian-controlled Kashmir” (0:03:16). As the IMF team tracks the bomb materials to this location, team member Ilsa Faust (Rebecca Ferguson) remarks that the area is near the Nubra River and the Siachen Glacier. She continues, “So a nuclear blast there would irradiate the largest natural irrigation system in the world. Fresh water from the border of China, to India, and Pakistan… They’re gonna starve one third of the world’s population” (1:44:31). This is in service of Walker’s manifesto, as referenced throughout the film: “The greater the suffering, the greater the peace” (1:44:48).

Both Walker and Hendricks turn to nuclear weapons to ensure peace, but the target of these threats are completely different. Walker’s plan is to strategically target an area of the globe that will do the most damage without stoking all-out nuclear war. This attack is also more precise, as it takes into account the wide-reaching effects of attacking a single waterway and impacting multiple countries with a single attack. This change shows the growth of the series over a few short years from mimicking Cold War threats of complete nuclear annihilation to the nuanced and precise attack on food supply rather than on human life directly. These films evolve and grow as the times change to portray more “realistic” threats that might not end in complete world destruction but aim to manipulate the world in the villain’s favor.

This chapter examined three major places or threats of interest during the Cold War and their influence on modern spy film genres. I included this part in my analysis because I originally hypothesized that the events of 9/11 would have had the clearest impact on these selected spy films, as they happened closer to the release dates, and I thought that the Cold War themes would have largely faded away. This chapter does support the idea spy films were forever changed by
the Cold War ending, as there were no more clear lines as to who the heroes and villains are. While there is not the same shorthand of “East bad, West good” that existed in the Cold War, I found that the Cold War still has an outsized impact on the stories that modern spy movies choose to tell even after the events of 9/11 made their own mark on global security. This is a testament to how influential the Cold War was on spy film, and it also suggests that modern spy film tries to play on that nostalgia factor and relates to older spy films by including similar threats.
Chapter Five: New Non-Territorial Threats

In this chapter, I discuss the increasingly common portrayal of non-state, non-territorial terror groups in the James Bond and Mission: Impossible films. Each of these film franchises heavily feature nebulous terror organizations, which are usually the ones causing the smaller attacks that pique our heroes’ attention. For each franchise, I first introduce the terror group, either Quantum or Spectre for the Bond films and the Syndicate for the M:I films, by sharing film quotes from or about group members that reveal their geopolitical intentions. I then place this within context, pointing out that these newer iterations are much more concerned with having global control through strategic attacks rather than creating one large act that can be traced back to them. I also point out each group’s lack of national borders and loyalties that these films present as a new threat that they are unprepared to handle. The effect of these films’ fearmongering of the non-territorial enemy is to reflect and reproduce audience fears after the 9/11 attacks that the perpetrators of terror are unknown, even to the spy agencies who are supposed to protect the people.

Bond: Quantum and Spectre

In the James Bond films, we are first introduced to the idea of a larger terror group existing in Casino Royale (2006)\(^1\). Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen) works as an money keeper for world terrorists, explaining himself to a Ugandan general that he has “provided reliable banking

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\(^1\) In the previous film Die Another Day (2002), and the preceding three films in which Pierce Brosnan portrayed James Bond (GoldenEye in 1995, Tomorrow Never Dies in 1997, and The World Is Not Enough in 1999), there are no references to a larger terror group being in charge of causing worldwide attacks.
services for many other freedom fighters over the years” (Campbell, 2006, 0:08:19), showing that he has had a hand in some of these. He is seen working in connection with a man called Mr. White (Jesper Christensen), who acts as a go-between for Le Chiffre and the people using his services. While Le Chiffre does act to cause conflict, he mainly causes this conflict in the interest of making money.

The next time that this mysterious group is mentioned is at the beginning of the next film, 2008’s *Quantum of Solace*. Mr. White, who was captured by Bond at the end of *Casino Royale*, is about to be questioned when he taunts Bond and MI6 head M (Judi Dench) about their ignorance and reveals that he has a mole in the government:

Mr. White: (laughing) “You really don’t know anything about us. It’s so amusing because we are on the other side, thinking, ‘Oh, the MI6, the CIA, they’re looking over our shoulders. They’re listening to our conversations,’ and the truth is you don’t even know we exist.”

M: “Well we do now, Mr. White, and we’re quick learners.”

Mr. White: “Oh really… Well, then, the first thing you should know about us is that we have people everywhere. Am I right?” (Forster, 2008, 0:09:51)

As he finishes his line, one of the MI6 agents helping to handle Mr. White shoots another agent, showing that the organization even has operatives undercover in MI6. This threat is immediate and unexpected, and it leaves M rattled that one of her own close agents was acting against her the entire time without her knowing. The organization that Mr. White is talking about is Quantum, which I have already spoken about earlier in relation to its exploitation of Haiti and Bolivia. Quantum’s goal is to control the world’s water supply, with one member calling it “the
world’s most precious resource” (0:43:02), and they plan to leverage this control to make money off of nations that they place under artificial droughts.

However, Quantum’s threat pales in comparison to the threat presented by the organization called Spectre, introduced in the film of the same name in 2015. This group, in a somewhat questionable story decision, ties together all of the villains that Daniel Craig’s James Bond has faced. Bond enters the meeting of this organization, pictured below, and listens into their conversations, where different representatives talk about their control of antimalarial medication, their work in human trafficking, and their efforts to control the new proposed Nine Eyes surveillance program.

One representative says, speaking about their efforts to control medication,

Representative: But, we face challenges from the WHO and their campaign against our counterfeit pharmaceuticals. We have now identified the key individuals to target. We expect the same success as we had against the Council on Human Trafficking. (Mendes, 2015, 0:38:45)
Spectre’s mode of operation is to control all kinds of organized crime by staging strategic attacks against people and organizations in power. They then take that power for themselves through violent means, made most clear in the case of the Nine Eyes program. In the film, the Nine Eyes program is being touted as an upgrade to the United Kingdom’s intelligence capabilities and aims to link the United Kingdom’s surveillance operations with that of eight other countries. Spectre is behind this plan, however, and they use violence to compel other countries to comply. This is evident in the case of South Africa, who originally voted no on the consolidation plan and only after a terrorist attack in their capital (caused by Spectre) was forced into agreeing in the hopes that more surveillance would stop another attack from happening.

_Spectre_ , dir. Sam Mendes, 1:16:36

Spectre does not just act as an example of a non-territorial terror group that promotes its own interests while wanting to stay secretive; it also serves to point out that the government’s reliance on surveillance is a net negative for society. This is evident of a broader theme in _Spectre_ about technology being easily corrupted and field agents being able to get the job done, but in the context of critical geopolitics, I believe that this portrayal is based on people’s distrust of increased surveillance measures that are put in place after real-world terror attacks. The Nine
Eyes program is a clear reference to the existing Five Eyes program, which unites the intelligence agencies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (ODNI website). By relating this to real-world events while also providing a fictional bad actor that exploits this program, these films draw upon existing fears to make the films more compelling while also alleviating the existing surveillance structures of any criticism. The only people to fear are those who use surveillance for nefarious purposes, and secret agents like James Bond will rise up and stop these people from ever gaining this power in the first place.

We like to think that the people in charge of this surveillance will act morally, but this plays on the (sometimes founded) fear that people will use this surveillance for their own interests or for state interests that might not help the lives of the people who are being surveilled. Inside this fear, though, exists the fear of a global organization running everything bad in the world in order to protect their own profits, a fear also present in the *M:I* movies.

*Mission: Impossible*: The Syndicate and the Apostles

The idea of a larger terror group in the *Mission: Impossible* films is fairly recent, with it first being mentioned at the end of the fourth film *Ghost Protocol* in 2011. This reference is incredibly quick, consisting of only the beginning of a message to Ethan Hunt that warns him of something called “The Syndicate:”

Audio Message: Good evening, Mr. Hunt. Thirty-six hours ago, there was a breach in our military’s communication network. Now, an emerging terror organization known as The Syndicate has control of our entire drone fleet. Their targets? Unknown. Your mission, should you choose to accept it … (2:06:02)
The message fades out, but it gives us a hint of what threats will be present in the following film. After a pre-title sequence scene where the IMF secures weapons from an enemy plane, *Mission: Impossible — Rogue Nation* describes more about the Syndicate in the information transmission that Ethan receives at the beginning of the movie:

Audio Message: The weapons you recovered in Belarus were confirmed to be VX nerve gas, capable of devastating a major city. The bodies of the air crew were found less than twenty-four hours after they landed in Damascus. They were identified as low-level Chechen separatists, with neither the access nor the ability to acquire the weapons they were transporting. This would support your suspicion that a shadow organization is committed to inciting revolution by enabling acts of terror in nations friendly to Western interests. IMF suspects this to be the same shadow organization you have been tracking for the last year, also known as the Syndicate. IMF would be right. (McQuarrie, 2015, 0:07:55)

Based on the description above, the Syndicate’s goals are to generally destabilize world powers by causing secretive and connected attacks. The group is made up of ex-secret agents from a variety of countries who are thought to be missing or dead. The map below shows the global reach of this terror network, which causes strategic attacks all over the world in different places to advance their interests.
Hunt explains that the Syndicate had arranged a deadly car accident for the President of Malawi and caused a civil war, had brought down a passenger plane in order to kill the Secretary of the World Bank, and had caused a chemical explosion that killed two thousand people and “bankrupted a global arms corporation” (0:47:34). These events in connection point towards a large, focused terror group that is hoping to bring about the downfall of society, according to Ethan, who suspects that these disgruntled ex-agents have formed a “rogue nation” (0:47:49) with their own interests not related to any specific country. Earlier in the film, Hunt references the idea that this Syndicate has been hard to track, correctly surmising that the group of presumed dead agents has kept the IMF from finding any leads. This enemy is invisible until they want their actions to be seen.

At the end of the film, the head of the Syndicate, ex-British agent Solomon Lane (Sean Harris), is captured by the IMF. However, much like in the Bond films, this group does not simply disappear. Instead, at the beginning of Mission: Impossible — Fallout, they rename themselves “the Apostles” and remain, in the words of Ethan’s security announcement below, “unknown and at large” (McQuarrie, 2018, 0:03:00). The announcement continues, “They have
since adopted a policy of terror for hire, making them an even greater threat” (0:03:07), crediting them with a smallpox outbreak in Kashmir. I found it interesting that these films describe the idea of “terror for hire” as an even larger threat than a consolidated group trying to destroy society as we know it. This makes me think that the films are reflecting the popular fear of outside terrorism by saying that the actions themselves are not important, but it is the fact that these operatives and be used by other people that makes them different and more dangerous.

I included the above images of these attacks and operatives being spread out over a world map because they convey the extra-national threat that these groups present. These operatives are not all from the same country, nor do they work in a consolidated area. Instead, they are focused on world destruction in the fifth film and on earning a profit in the sixth film. They are not looking for notoriety or to spread an ideology; they want to remain hidden, and by dispersing themselves and literally faking their own deaths, they are.

These terror groups present in the James Bond and Mission: Impossible franchises are spoken about as if they are new threats that are impossible to track. Indeed, they are a marked
departure from the common enemy lines drawn during the Cold War, and they are also not specifically in reference to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Instead of trying to spread a new ideology through notoriety, these groups are concerned with the material and social effects of their actions. They are not interested in spectacle; they are interested in results. Their international span makes them more difficult to eradicate and more entrenched than ever in multiple operations worldwide.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

I started this project because of my love of the spy film genre. Ever since I was young, I was drawn to books and movies that glamourized the life of being a spy and the places that espionage might take you to visit. As I grew up, I moved on to the more violent stuff, and started watching the very franchises that this thesis focuses on. I learned about the world around me, and I then started to think more about the messages that these films were portraying. Not just the thematic lines of relationships and betrayal, and the fight against obscurity in an increasingly technical world, but the view of the world that was created in the audience’s minds. At the outset of this project, I believed that these films were saying something under the surface, and this project shows that the Mission: Impossible films and James Bond films are pieces of cultural evidence that are worthy of deeper study.

Through my previous chapters, I explored the past and present fears that these films reflect. I looked at the impacts of the 9/11 attacks on these films, both by looking at the films released in close proximity to the attacks and by looking at how later entries continued to show imagery and thematic references. I then interrogated whether the Cold War’s influence on spy film had really waned in the wake of 9/11, and I found that this was not the stark division between eras that I thought it would be. Finally, I looked at what new threats in these films looked like, discovering that the scary novelty was actually the lack of borders and simple map designations that told audiences — and civilians — who was good and who was bad.

If we look at these films as what a culture believes in, and if we look at these films as showing a government doing something, then we can assume that this matters because it is showing these actions as “correct”. These films, however differently they portray the world
around them, are shot from the perspective of a white male agent of an imperial world power, and these men (and the films) use this implicit “allowance” of their presence in world affairs as a tool to act in the best interest of their countries without much oversight or punishment in the other countries they act in. Notably, each of the films I studied were directed by men, a fact that became clearest to me when I was writing my citations for each film. This adds to the importance of keeping gender and power in mind when studying the popular geopolitics of spy film, as discrepancies behind the camera can lead to discrepancies on the screen and in the created worlds portrayed therein.

The study of spy movies is unique from other critical geopolitical study because of the world it occupies. Kackman, writing about the original *M:I* television series, observes: “Operating in a fantastic world and ranging over an artificial map of imaginary countries, the IMF enacted through technology what “real” U.S. agents abroad in the late 1960s could not do” (Kackman, 2005, p. 164). The world of spy film is semi-fantastical in that it has technology that might be beyond our own, but it is a world in which magic and the supernatural does not exist (unless you call “plot armor” and the near inability for main characters to get severely hurt, magic). This means that spy movies take place between two extremes which have already been studied in the realm of critical geopolitics: the realism-based war movie, like Kathryn Bigelow’s 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty* (Rashidi et al., 2014; Kennedy, 2017), and the completely fantastical superhero movie. We thus learn something different when applying critical geopolitics to spy films, as they portray a heightened version of the real world which we do not know to be impossible, but which might be attainable in the future (or may even be attained already by governmental technology). This heightened version of the world lets filmmakers apply potentially feasible solutions to real-world issues, and by studying these potential solutions, we
can see what the general culture’s hopes for the future or for the present are. Because spy films occupy the middle ground, they let us bring together existing scholarship on spectacular and non-spectacular worlds and put them in direct comparison.

Following from this above idea of the semi-fantastical world of spy films, it is even more important that we use spy film as sources for general fears about technology. These films include fear of surveillance, especially embodied by Spectre’s Nine Eyes program, while placing this heightened technology in a real-world setting with real-world fears. While my thesis did not specifically track the development of technology and surveillance throughout these films, I noticed the evolution of technology in my initial viewings, and this would be an interesting idea by which to start another project.

My project also leaves out the critical moments between the end of the Cold War and the events of 9/11. Initially, I was going to consider all of the films in these franchises that were released after the Cold War and frame my analysis in a post-Cold War context, but due to time constraints and my own research into post-9/11 film, I decided to leave those films out. More time on this thesis might have allowed me to bridge this gap and provide analysis for the post-Cold War, pre-9/11 era of spy films. However, my thesis as it stands gives a comprehensive analysis of the created world and general mood of post-9/11 spy films, and this provides a good starting point for me or other researchers to construct a greater post-Cold War analysis of these two franchises.

Future Research

There are so many directions to take when studying these films from a geographical perspective, and I only chose a select few in this thesis to make it a manageable project and to
keep this thesis as relevant as possible. Some spots that I would have liked to expand upon is a more focused discussion of the “chromatic othering” as it tracks between these films and different locations, more focus on the length of time spent at each location and the locations chosen, and a discussion of the thematic nature of torture as it manifests in each of these films after the 9/11 attacks and especially after the American government started to respond to these attacks.

Another avenue to explore would be how these film franchises portray the relationships between the British and United States espionage agencies. While there are no crossovers between the *M:I* and Bond universes, MI6 and the CIA feature heavily in both franchises. Beginning with *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*, Hunt meets MI6 agent Ilsa Faust (Rebecca Ferguson), who is working undercover to take down Solomon Lane. However, she is constantly betrayed by her superiors at the British agency, and she is continually forced to prove herself loyal to her country’s cause. She acts simultaneously as ally and enemy to Hunt, trying to protect the world while also trying to save her own reputation. Faust appears in the subsequent film, *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*, and she is set to appear in the next installment in the franchise.

The role of the ‘friendly American agent’ in the more recent James Bond films is Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright), who introduces himself to Bond in *Casino Royale* as “a brother from Langley.” Leiter as a character was present in the book series as well as earlier films, and Wright’s portrayal of the character appears in the subsequent film *Quantum of Solace* as well as in the latest film *No Time To Die*. This CIA agent allies himself with Bond, helping him first in the poker game by giving Bond enough money to continue playing. Leiter himself is often betrayed, however, but instead of laying the blame with the agency in general, as *M:I* does, the Bond films point out specific bad actors who are corrupt or double agents. In *Quantum of Solace*,
for instance, Leiter works with CIA agent Gregg Beam (David Harbour), who is looking to make money off of the villain’s scheme to sell water and destabilize nations. Finally, in *No Time to Die*, Leiter is killed by a double agent after tipping off a then-retired Bond to another scheme. Leiter is consistently seen as a friendly source of aid to Bond.

Bond scholars have referenced the connection between the two major spy agencies, with one writing that

the Bond films foster the notion that the British secret service works in close collaboration with America in a “special relationship” that protects the world against plots hatched in the East. (Street, 2016, p. 188)

This partnership began in the 1960s Bond films which “assured a common transatlantic partnership that worked to destroy communist conspiracies” (Street, 2016, p. 220) and “were particularly concerned with themes that related to both British and American issues” (Street, 2016, p. 183). Indeed, the connection between these two agencies in film reflects a vested interest in portraying members of the spy agencies as friends of one another, all working towards the same goal. The ways in which these two franchises speak to each other as British and American productions go far beyond merely a change in accent. Dodds and Funnell (2017) have previously written about the relationship between MI6 and the CIA in the Bond films, but there does not seem to be much work yet focusing on the portrayal of MI6 in the *Mission: Impossible* films.

There is also a lack of scholarly literature on the *Mission: Impossible* series in general. The Bond films have been studied extensively, likely because they have been around for longer (the Bond film series began in 1962), but also perhaps because they are based on the literary works of Ian Fleming. In contrast, the *M:I* films only began in 1996, and they were based on a
television series, which may not have seemed as worthy of study as a book series at the time. I also found some mistakes in existing analyses of the *M:I* films: in the McSweeney book I often reference, the author mistakenly states that the IMF acronym (here used to mean Impossible Mission Force) stands for “International Monetary Fund.” I hope to spur a greater appreciation for these films in scholarly literature in order to prevent mistakes like this from happening in future research. In this thesis, I hoped to prove that the *M:I* films are worthy of academic study as a representation of American espionage values and that they are not just reskins of the Bond films, and any new literature that specifically mentions these movies will open up a world of new possible theories on American spy culture.

This scholarly focus on spy film could also take on a more economic lens and examine more closely the amount of military funding and collaboration that these films receive. There is a long history of governmental and military agencies using their influence on big-budget films (Alford, 2010; Darmawan, 2020; Jenkins & Secker, 2022). I did find a few mentions of the films I studied being influenced or aided in some way by the United States government or military, but I chose to largely leave this part out in order to make my thesis more focused. A more focused look at the influence that these entities have on the Bond and *M:I* franchises would be a welcome addition to this growing field of literature, especially because the real-world geopolitical situation and political economy of filmmaking may have an influence on the selection of threats or antagonist countries.

Finally, an earlier draft of this thesis included much more specific analysis of geographical locations, especially cities, and their use in these films. I cut out a section that described a break-in at the Vatican as a metaphor for the ability of the United States to penetrate even the most secure locations, showing their power. This section also looked at the choice of
California filming locations to represent areas in Germany, calling attention to the manipulation of space by directors and the effects this produces. While this portion did not make sense in the complete thesis I ended up writing, I still believe there is much more research to be done on the specific portrayals of locations in spy film and on the connections between this visual portrayal and critical geopolitics.

In conclusion, this thesis is only the beginning of what can be learned from examining spy franchise films with a critical geopolitical lens. Film is an invaluable resource not only for our entertainment but for our understanding of dominant political and worldview narratives. By ignoring these critical primary sources as fiction, we fail to see that all fiction is made in response to real events. Popular geopolitics helps to coax these themes out into the public eye and put them under scrutiny so that we may be more conscious about what we are expressing to global audiences. The world portrayed in film may not exist in the physical world, but geographic imaginaries can be just as influential as geographic truths. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to take these imaginaries seriously.
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