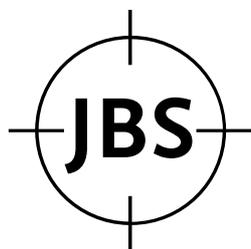


# *Atomic Blonde*, Neue Deutsche Welle, and “Jane Bond”

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*Atomic Blonde* features a secret agent of outstanding ability who excels in every situation and who starts a casual relationship with a beautiful girl throughout the course of her adventure. Such characteristics are reminiscent of James Bond. Yet Lorraine Broughton differs largely from the enigmatic British secret agent: she is female.

Based on the graphic novel *The Coldest City* (2012), written by Anthony Johnston and illustrated by Sam Hart, *Atomic Blonde* is an action spy thriller set in the Berlin of an alternative world during the fall of the Berlin wall. David Leitch’s film relies largely on its musical score to recreate the zeitgeist of 1980’s Germany – particularly the soundscape of the Neue Deutsche Welle (“New German Wave”), a popular musical genre of Cold War-era Germany. But this sound also serves a diegetic purpose, too: the lyrics of the songs selected often reflect what is happening in the particular scenes over which they are played. So, for instance, Leitch elects to overlay an audio track of Lena’s 1983 anti-war protest song, “99 Luftballons” (both the original and a slower, more melancholy version), during a scene in which the camera shows the innocent victims of nations in conflict and those who must endure the social, cultural, and above all economic hardships of times of great upheaval. Nena’s song, of course, tells the story of a military general who mistakes ninety-nine children’s balloons floating in the sky for uniden-



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tified flying objects, and who sends in a squadron of pilots to shoot them down. Dismayed by this general's trigger-happy actions, neighbouring governments mount their own military response in retaliation, imagining that the general has moved against them. The result is a ninety-nine-year war that has originated from a harmless display of children's balloons. The song's lyrics, which underline the absurdities of fighting a non-existent opponent, speak very much to the diffuse and disembodied threat of the Cold War era, with the colour of the balloons an unmistakable reference to the "red threat" of communism from the Eastern Bloc. In the film, the underlying moral inquiry of Nena's lyrics into the nature of war and its justifications is voiced by the Head of Station, David Percival (played by James McAvoy), who has been assigned to assist Broughton (Charlize Theron) in her mission. Percival questions the purpose and legitimacy of his mission, and the overlaying of Nena's lyrics with a shot depicting the bodies of dead civilians suggests that, like the ninety-nine red balloons of the song, these civilians' deaths represent the fabricated premise upon which war is waged within the film – the implication being that innocent people do not die as a *consequence* of war but as a means to *legitimate* conflict in the first place.

Similarly, Leitch's use of upbeat popular music from the period contrasts grotesquely with the film's general *mise-en-scène*. In one scene, as Broughton's plane to Germany is departing, Peter Schilling's 1983 song "Major Tom (völlig losgelöst)" ("utterly unconnected") is played over the visuals. The lyrics to Schilling's song describe the orbit of a satellite in outer space, emphasising its disconnection from earth – much like Broughton, in the instance her plane takes off. The happy tune stands very much at odds with Broughton's mission and its sinister undertones: to find a murderous double-agent who has killed a cherished colleague of hers. Broughton's entry to 1989 Berlin is thus couched in a contrasting mood which very much defines Leitch's film, caught as it is between the buoyancy of the extra-diegetic score and the darker overtones of the plot itself. The repetition of Schilling's song, which is also played over a later scene in which Broughton fights a KGB agent in a taxi, is meant to further underline the tragedy of war and the disconnection of humanity – for the song, of course, ends in the loss of the satellite, as the pilot who is aboard, the fictional Major Tom (of David Bowie's "Space Oddity"[1969]), decides to abandon earth as a result of the selfishness of the human race and the impending dangers of nuclear conflict. The discrepancy between the film's visuals and extra-diegetic music, as well as between the tone and lyrics of the music itself, further reinforces the principles of deception at work during the Cold War era, creating a multi-media text in which each of the component elements are subtly at odds with one another.

While the soundtrack does much to amplify the film's tonal dissonance, the visuals and cinematography very much unite Leitch's text with the source material. Jonathan Sela's photography is mostly grey and chrome-blue in colour, which makes for a satisfying adaption of the black and white palette of the original graphic novel, as the film's monochrome befits the harsh contrast in light and dark forms in *The Coldest City*. Through Sela's lens, the bleach-blonde of Broughton's hair, as well as the bright red of her high heels, create the effect of a non-realist visual arts piece, reminiscent of the graphic novel style or even a stylised photograph. Moreover, the subdued colours of the film amplify the oppressive atmosphere of a European city on the brink of dramatic change, boiling with hostility and resistance. The film's accompanying text elements are also befitting the carefully chosen composition: the font used for most on-screen text (such as the inter-titles which overlay the film and indicate to the audience a change of location) revive the 1980s in general and Cold War Berlin in particular, as the lettering is designed in a colourful, graffiti-like style, accompanied by a brief audio track of a spray can that can be heard as the lettering appears on the screen.

But aside from its unconventional, dissonant soundtrack and its artificial colour scheme, *Atomic Blonde* also narratologically diverges from traditional film-making by presenting without comment or question a female action hero. Moreover, the film questions basic assumptions about traditional signifiers of femininity and genteelness by frequently depicting Broughton utilising in combat several items which might otherwise be associated with female domesticity: in an ironic twisting of gender rules, Broughton employs basic cooking utensils (the door of a fridge freezer and a hot plate, for example) to lethal effect against her male aggressors. It is clear from Broughton's skills in close combat (for which Theron completed most of the choreography) that the film's title itself is meant to be read as an ironic inversion of the "blonde bombshell" trope, raising expectations on the one hand, while deliberately shattering and subverting them on the other.

However, this is not to say that the sex of the principal character is entirely made redundant within the narrative. That Broughton is female means that, unlike the character of James Bond, for whom sexual discrimination is a way of life, Broughton is not considered within the narrative to be an admired role-model or hero for women (in much the same way that Bond might be thought of for a certain kind of man). Instead, being female within the context of this film means that, in spite of her credentials and her lethal skill-set, Broughton is still prone to

male discrimination. It is revealing that when her partner in the film, Percival, complains about women hindering the progress of the mission at hand, his comment is a strategic one designed to dissimulate his own role in the failure of the mission. Thus, the film makes explicit one of the ways in which discrimination against women expressly derives from the male character's inability to account for his own failings. Similarly, after the scene in which Broughton fights off multiple aggressors to protect the life of a (male) German defector, Broughton's physical prowess goes unremarked upon by the man, but he nevertheless sees fit to comment on the faultiness of her German language skills: instead of showing appreciation for her having rescued him, the man marks out as a weakness the lack of finesse in her spoken German. Whereas in the graphic novel misogyny is almost parodic (Percival refuses to return to England when he learns that a woman has become prime minister), the film makes it clear that, much like the threat of communism, misogyny is much more diffuse and is centred in no one man in particular, but within the inferiority of all men at large.

One of the reasons for this shift (aside, perhaps, from the increased scrutiny misogynistic practices within the film industry have received in recent months) is the decision by filmmakers to have Broughton identify as bisexual, a facet which was not part of the original graphic novel. The decision to change the character of Pierre Lasalle, who appears in the graphic novel, to the young, female French agent, Delphine Lasalle, is one that is predicated on an understanding of the original text's gender politics. In contrast to Lasalle, who is presented as overwhelmed and unfit for the secret service (presumably because she can be seen as representative of a "softer" femininity – much like Eve Moneypenny in 2012's *Skyfall*, who, unlike James Bond, is relegated to desk duty for having failed a field assignment), Broughton's tough brand of femininity is augmented all the more because she is given her own traditional "Bond girl," or someone that she is charged with protecting and saving, and someone in whom she takes physical pleasure. In this sense, Broughton really does become a "Jane Bond," a female action figure who is constrained by the mythic archetype of Bond, and who seemingly flouts conventions at the same time as she is forcibly consigned to a role long occupied by Bond's traditional brand of hyper-masculinity. Broughton's sexual dominance in her relationship with Lasalle is posited as something akin to the gender supremacy of Bond over his many women, and while *Atomic Blonde* extends the space and range of Broughton's character (and female action heroes, in general) from the original graphic novel, Leitch's film attempts, with much difficulty, to create a new model of female-driven action films without the need for treading on Bond's toes.

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