

“Every Now and Then a Trigger has to be Pulled”

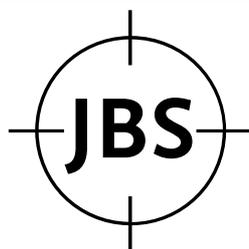
Narrative, Nemesis, and Retributive Justice in the James Bond Films

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This article offers an analysis of the James Bond films using the model of narrative equilibrium states proposed by Tzvetan Todorov (1967). The theory advanced by Todorov of the minimal complete plot will be used as a framework for the exploration of the ways in which transitions between these states are undertaken in the Bond films, within a moral framework that identifies retribution and retributive justice as drivers of change. Building on the groundwork laid by Kingsley Amis (1965) and Umberto Eco (1992), alongside discussions of the structure (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987) and screenwriting processes (Maibaum 2019) of the Bond narratives, this article will frame an analysis of the narrative structure of the Bond films with specific reference to the idea of retributive justice drawn from the mythological concept of *nemesis*, focusing on the moral aspects of narrative progression.

The minimal complete plot refers to the way by which narrative transitions take place:

[t]he minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term “equilibrium” [...] means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilib-



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rium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement. (Todorov, 65)

Narrative progression in this form therefore represents two changes: firstly, between Similar Equilibrium (SE) and Imbalance (I); and secondly, between Imbalance and Different Equilibrium (DE), where “Similar Equilibrium” refers to the state of narrative at the beginning of a film, while “Different Equilibrium” refers to the narrative state at its conclusion. Applying this concept to the Bond films leads towards an analysis that is structuralist in nature, not dissimilar to that of Eco’s “invariable scheme”, set out in the following terms:

- A. M moves and gives a task to Bond.
- B. Villain moves and appears to Bond (perhaps in vicarious forms).
- C. Bond moves and gives a first check to Villain or Villain gives a first check to Bond.
- D. Woman moves and shows herself to Bond.
- E. Bond takes Woman (possesses her or begins her seduction).
- F. Villain captures Bond (with or without Woman, or at different moments).
- G. Villain tortures Bond (with or without Woman.)
- H. Bond beats Villain (or kills him, or kills his representative or helps at their killing).
- I. Bond, convalescing, enjoys Woman, who he then loses. (161)

In structuralist terms this, in turn, bears a resemblance to the narrative elements identified by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). A structuralist analysis also makes it possible to map specific elements from Eco’s “invariable scheme” to the concept of transitions in narrative equilibrium: Move B (in Eco’s scheme) would represent the shift between SE and I at the beginning of the majority of Bond narratives; while Move H would represent the beginning of the transition from I to DE, providing narrative closure. This framework, where the transition between equilibrium states in Bond narratives is first dictated by the antagonist and then corrected by the protagonist, also sits at the centre of a more complex arrangement of requirements and formulas within the production of the Bond films.

The shift in equilibrium within the Bond narratives has been noted previously by Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott in *Bond and Beyond*. Referencing Steve Neale (1980), who frames narrative in terms of an initial state of narrative equilibrium and “the tracing of the dispersal and refiguration of its elements” (qtd. in Bennett and Woollacott, 95), Bennett and Woollacott highlight the role played by generic distinctions in terms of the reader/viewer narrative engagement. Neale, however, advances the argument that these states of equilibrium are primarily genre-specific or at least genre-dependent, and that the “elements’ in question, their equilibrium and disequilibrium, their order/disorder, are not simply reducible to the signified components of a given narrative situation” (20). The framework provided by Todorov offers greater leeway for an enquiry into the nature of retribution as a genre-nonspecific driver of narrative change. Where a generic analysis of the Bond films would identify broader trends in narrative progression, this particular analysis is predicated on morality, a concept that remains relatively static within the wider body of specific narrative elements within the Bond films. The reasoning offered in this article pays particular attention to the relationship between Bond as the protagonist and the villain as the antagonist, in turn referencing concepts of *hubris* and *nemesis* drawn both from mythology and from the contemporary work of David Ronfeldt (1994). My argument therefore relies on a recognition that the narratives of the Bond films are based on the requirement of corrective action created by the *hubris* of the Bond villain. The consistent presence of *hubris* within the Bond narratives creates an invariable narrative formula where, as Hans Baernhoft argues,

the Bond villains want to take over the world [...] They are industrialists, magnates or, in the case of SPECTRE, a proto Al Qaeda. They may not expect to govern the entire world, but they do want absolute control [...] If they could collate their philosophy[...] it would include repression, domination, and a hierarchy based on strength and greed. (2003, 50-51)

The argument put forward, here, centres on the notion that the villain bears responsibility for the narrative transition between Similar Equilibrium and Imbalance, while Bond possesses the necessary narrative agency to facilitate the transition between Imbalance and Different Equilibrium. With reference to the concept of *nemesis* – from “the goddess of indignation against, and retribution for, evil deeds and undeserved good fortune” (Atsma 2017, n.p.) who acts as an “indignant avenger”, is “merciless”, “envies good fortune”, “punishes hubris”, and, im-

portantly, “guards against excess” (Hornblower and Spawforth 2005, 1033), particularly overweening pride in the face of the gods (*hubris*) – where Bond’s antagonists exhibit *hubris* (in their belief that they deserve to gain at the expense of others, for example), they set in motion a change in narrative equilibrium which requires a course correction by an appropriate agent. This course correction represents a central element of the Bond narrative, as Jeremy Black argues: “This pattern, of the hubris and callousness of evil, providing opportunities for the bravery and integrity of Bond, was set out at the outset of the series” (2005, 10). Thus, the actions of Bond’s antagonists are, by necessity, the sort that provokes reactions; as Aristotle has stated, the “greatest crimes [...] are caused by excess and not by necessity” (1999, 35). The *hubris* of evil, then, represents within the Bond universe an all-encompassing threat with a potentially global impact. The conscious will to power for its own sake puts things on the proper scale. As Amis notes:

A man who wants £10 Million (Blofeld’s expectation in *Thunderball*) is no good for our purposes, then, if he wants it just so that he can buy a lot of girls and whiskey. That would make him too much like ourselves. The conscious will to power for its own sake puts things on the proper scale. It must be very rare as a sole motive in power-seekers. Put in Dr No’s terms it becomes virtually unbelievable, or at least hopelessly obscure. This makes it more frightening. (68)

The level of threat is, however, relatively mutable within the narratives of the Bond films as a function of changing socio-political contexts. While in the Connery films (and in the sole Lazenby entry) the villains’ ploys tend to focus on Cold War destabilisation and ushering the USA and USSR to the brink of war, the Moore films latterly tended towards narratives of apocalypse. This tendency towards larger-scale eschatological narratives was, in part, related to audience reaction; as Bond screenwriter Richard Maibaum identifies, the popularity of “fantastical effects” with the audience led to their desire for “more of everything” - until, that is, “the monster ran away with us and there was no way of stopping it” (142). The Dalton era returned to narratives concerned with drug interdiction and personal revenge; the Brosnan films resituated the narratives to include villains with mandates of global destabilisation; and, most recently, the Craig films include an overarching narrative with reference to “Quantum”, an organisation with a mandate for funding initiatives that destabilise worldwide equilibrium –

and which is revealed to be a subsection of the villainous organisation SPECTRE, in the film of the same name. In each case, the level of threat is sufficient to trigger the specific response of deploying Bond as a corrective agent. The level of threat – that is, world-altering consequences which in some way benefits the antagonist – represents simultaneously extreme *hubris* and presumption on the part of the antagonist, at a level which incites

the righteous indignation felt (by gods and men) at anyone who violates the natural order of things, either by breaking a moral law, or by having an excess of some quality, such as riches or happiness or pride. (March 2011, 24)

This *hubris* represents the “capital sin of pride” (Ronfeldt, 2), a contravention of the virtues of *aidos* (humble reverence for law) and *sophrosyne* (self-restraint; a set of proper limits), qualities which are understandably lacking in the villain of a Bond narrative. Instead, the *hubris* of the antagonist represents their *hamartia* (their fatal flaw). Ronfeldt’s criteria for *hubris*, then, would be akin to a checklist of character traits for Bond antagonists:

Words and phrases like the following – overweening pride; self-glorification; arrogance; insolence; overconfidence in one’s ability and right to do whatever one wants, to the point of disdain for the cardinal virtues of life; ignoring other people’s feelings; overstepping boundaries; and impiously defying all who stand in the way – are found in descriptions of people who have *hubris*. (ibid.)

In mythology, the correction of this *hubris* would have been undertaken by the goddess Nemesis, who “might then descend to destroy the vainglorious pretender, to cut man down to size, and to restore equilibrium” (ibid.). Within the literary Bond narratives, the moral framework of James Bond conflicts with the ideas of *hubris* precisely because of the characterisation of Bond himself. Kingsley Amis argues that

a fairly orthodox moral system, vague perhaps but none the less recognisable through accumulation pervades all Bond’s adventures. Some things are regarded as good; loyalty, fortitude, a sense of responsibility, a readiness to regard one’s safety, even one’s life, as less important than the major interests of one’s organization and one’s country. (83-84)

In narrative terms, however, the moral framework – that the villain must be stopped because they represent “the conscious will to power for its own sake” (Amis, 68) – sits alongside the narrative requirement to establish a state of Different Equilibrium. In moral terms, the Bond villain, who embodies “tyranny, readiness to inflict pain on the weak or helpless, [and/or] the unscrupulous pursuit of money and power” (ibid.), represents a ratification of the hubristic behaviours identified by Ronfeldt. In narrative terms, the villainous scheme cannot be allowed to come to pass because of the threat it would represent to the *status quo* and because of the extreme destabilisation of worldly equilibrium which would follow. In dramatic terms, a world in which Bond’s antagonist succeeds cannot exist because it would preclude the ongoing need for a corrective agent. Such a narrative turn would represent a potential transition from Imbalance to Similar Equilibrium, where DE would be the coming to fruition of the villain’s plan.

The *hamartia* of the Bond villain is not solely constrained to their hubristic plans for domination, material gain, or destabilisation; it is also found within their inability to prevent Bond from halting their activities. This is something the *Austin Powers* films took an appropriate amount of glee in parodying. Within the first film of the series, *International Man of Mystery*, the following exchange occurs when the eponymous agent is captured by Dr. Evil, who is gloating to his son, Scott.

- Dr. Evil: Scott, I want you to meet Daddy’s nemesis, Austin Powers.
- Scott Evil: What, are you feeding him? Why don’t you just kill him?
- Dr. Evil: No, Scott. I have an even better idea. I’m going to place him in an easily escapable situation involving an overly elaborate and exotic death.
- Scott Evil: Why don't you just shoot him now? I mean, I'll go get a gun. We'll shoot him together. It'll be fun. Bang! Dead. Done.

Here, *Austin Powers* parodies the shifting of narrative agency; that is, the power to have meaningful impact on the ongoing narrative situation. In the majority of instances within the Bond films, Bond’s involvement in the plot is contingent upon the villain’s appropriation of narrative agency: that is, the transition from Similar Equilibrium to Imbalance. As his comprehension of the villain’s plot dawns, Bond develops agency across the course of the narrative to halt the im-

pact of this plot, and to nullify it entirely. At the same time, the villain progressively loses narrative agency, precisely because the transition from Imbalance to Different Equilibrium within the Bond narrative is based on the requirement that the *hubris* of evil be set right. As such, the moral and a narrative framework for the Bond films is framed largely through retributive justice. This framework dictates that, although new state of equilibrium is brought about by the close of the narrative, it does not signify a return to Similar Equilibrium but rather a return to order.

This framework, in which the transition between equilibrium states is first dictated by the antagonist and then corrected by the protagonist, sits at the centre of a more complex arrangement of requirements and formulas within the production of the Bond films. The film's screenwriting process, or the audiences' expectations of a certain "Bond formula", has led to "a more mechanical kind of screen writing rather than an inspirational one", according to screenwriter Richard Maibaum. Maibaum notes that the Bond films represent

a different kind of screenwriting. There are so many facets and things that have to be all woven together. The love story, the action, the capers, the backgrounds – all of that. And then it has to be reasonably amusing. It also has to be serious enough that the audience sits there in suspended disbelief. It's very hard. (155)

Maibaum also acknowledges that the screenwriting formula for Bond films also contains a very specific kind of narrative stasis:

The public knows, when they go into a movie theatre, that Bond will prevail. That is perhaps the one given one can count on, when going to see a Bond film, even if you do not know anything else about the picture or its plot. All else is very much a commentary on him, and what he can do. "What will he do this time?" "How will he get out of whatever impossible situation put on a plate before him?" (ibid., 106)

As such, the static element of the Bond formula – that Bond will survive and "prevail" – means that the villain cannot "just shoot him now", as Scott Evil suggests. It is naturally quite rare within filmic narratives that the protagonist dies or is otherwise completely expunged from the narrative before the closing credits. There are a number of exceptions, of course (*To Live and Die In LA*, *No Country*

For Old Men, The Place Beyond the Pines); while the conclusion to the most recent Bond film, *No Time to Die*, underlines the radical potential of such totalising disequilibrium. By and large, though, the normative precondition (i.e. that Bond will prevail) passively strips the villain of their agency and forms a condition of transfer whereby narrative agency is transitioned from villain to Bond by the story's close. As such, the Bond narrative – while subject to the transition of equilibrium states and to the moral interpretation of retributive justice – is also situated within the constraints of audience expectations. Maibaum states that he wrote “my vision of James Bond qualified by what audiences seem to like about him” (86); as this “vision” sits alongside audience requirements for specific narrative elements of the Bond formula. According to James Chapman, these conventions contribute to the longevity of the franchise, precisely because there is a reliance on an understanding of the elements necessary to “find the right balance between repetition and variation, between continuity and change” (2007, 94). Chapman expands on this balance:

On one hand the narrative formula of the Bond series remains constant. Audiences have come to expect the familiar situations such as Bond's briefing by M, his visit to Q's workshop to collect his equipment [...] the seduction of the girl, and the scene where the villain reveals his grand design to Bond before leaving him an a bizarre and improbable death-scenario, from which he escapes, and so on. (ibid.)

Indeed, as Chapman underlines, the least successful of all Bond films are those which have “deviated furthest from the usual narrative conventions” (ibid., 94-95). The narrative of retribution, therefore, must sit within the conventions which audiences have come to expect.

In respect of the moral aspects of these narrative shifts, however, the Bond films do also evidence a more complex or nuanced take on their own methodology. Here, I refer specifically to the methods by which Bond affects Eco's move H and facilitates a shift between Imbalance and Different Equilibrium. In the first instance, it is worth considering the means by which Bond is empowered with agency. One example of this would be Amis's point that Bond represents a counterspy rather than a spy *per se*; as a counterspy his agency is derived from reactive rather than proactive ideas (11). In another context, Barbara Korte highlights that the role of the secret agent also confers a “special agency” on Bond, one that (alongside traditional heroic attributes) is also associated with “autonomy and

leadership” (2017, 1). In analysing the “pirate motif” in the work of Fleming, Katharina Hagen also identifies complicity as a moral issue, noting, in particular, that the character of Darko Kerim from Fleming’s novel *From Russia with Love* undertakes morally questionable actions that are “useful and beyond reproach” only because they are “beneficial to the completion of Bond’s (and Britain’s) mission”, and which are “endorsed by the fact that Bond is a sanctioned government agent” (2018, 7).

A more recent analysis by Roger Pauly engages with the idea that Bond is an assassin – something that, although a “fully accepted part of the Allied arsenal of tactics used in World War II”, was more problematic in fiction, and which Fleming understood in term of the idea that “post-war popular culture viewed officially sanctioned murder with some distaste” (2021, 7). Pauly identifies descriptions of Bond as an “executioner” alongside Felix Leiter’s euphemism of Bond’s role as “pest control”:

Indeed, Fleming seemed to confirm this idea of Bond-as-killer in a 1958 meeting with Raymond Chandler, noting that “I never intended my leading character, James Bond, to be a hero. I intended him to be a sort of blunt instrument wielded by a government department”. (ibid.)

The description of Bond as a “blunt instrument” recurs later in the filmic *Casino Royale* (2006), which in turn offers a further teasing-apart of Bond’s precise role:

James Bond:	Well, I understand double-0s have a very short life-expectancy. So your mistake will be short-lived.
M:	Bond, this may be too much for a blunt instrument to understand, but arrogance and self-awareness seldom go hand in hand
James Bond:	So you want me to be half monk, half hitman?

For Pauly it is “quite clear” that Bond’s “key organisational duty is assassination” (9). This perhaps undermines the notion that the transition of narrative equilibrium is largely based on a moral requirement of retribution, where death would represent the terminal moral sanction of a retributive framework. At the same time, Eco’s Move H does not require the death of the villain, only that they are beaten. Depending on the *hubris* of the villain, however, death can arrive as a

consequence of the shift from Imbalance to Different Equilibrium. Expressions of retributive justice within the Bond films do, however, vary; while Dr. No, Rosa Klebb, and Auric Goldfinger are killed by Bond as part of the move from Imbalance to Different Equilibrium, this is not always the case with other examples. A shift towards the layering of retribution and poetic justice can be observed in *Thunderball*, where Largo is not killed by Bond but rather by Largo's mistress Domino in revenge for the death of her brother and her own mistreatment at Largo's hands.

Moral necessity, then, is the principal driver of change between narrative states. Where, in the first instance, the antagonist wields agency to effect the transition between Similar Equilibrium and Imbalance, it is often (but not always) Bond's duty and responsibility to transition the narrative from a state of Imbalance to Different Equilibrium: to countermand the actions of the antagonist and to shift the narrative into a state that resembles the prior *status quo*, albeit with minor changes. It is also worth noting that this analysis relies on viewing the Bond films as discrete single entities, whereas the Craig-era films evidence a shift towards "seriality" (Pankratz and Böhm, 2020) which ought to be explored further in terms its wider impact on the series' narrative mechanics. In bringing together concepts drawn from narrative mechanics and the morality of retributive justice, then, this article has highlighted the way in which the narratives of the Bond film series use a waxing and waning agency in order to effect changes between equilibrium states. Bond, as the protagonist, must have the agency to act in order to have impact in two areas: thwarting the plan of the antagonist; and, in doing so, transitioning the narrative from a state of Imbalance to one of Different Equilibrium. Bond acts as moral arbiter in punishing the antagonist for their *hubris*; as *Skyfall* make clear, Bond has the sole responsibility for this arbitration as the human face of British Intelligence:

- Q: Age is no guarantee of efficiency.
Bond: And youth is no guarantee of innovation.
Q: Well, I'll hazard I can do more damage on my laptop sitting in my pajamas before my first cup of Earl Grey than you can do in a year in the field.
Bond: Oh, so why do you need me?
Q: Every now and then a trigger has to be pulled.
Bond: Or not pulled. It's hard to know which in your pajamas.

In the narrative of the Bond films the world must be saved; or, at the very least, pulled back from the brink of total destabilisation. Separately, in moral terms, the villain or antagonist must be punished; the callousness of evil must meet the relentlessness of fate. Bond must prevail against all odds not only because of the expectations of a paying audience, but also because *hubris* must be punished, equilibrium must be restored, and a trigger, on occasion, must be pulled.

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