



A Decade in Review: The Best Spy Films, Part I (2000-2004)

Contributors

Craig Arthur, Wesley Britton, David E. Foster, Anders Frejdh, Amanda Ohlke, Paul Rowlands

Introduction I

by Wesley Britton

One trend that became clear to me while I wrote my first three books is that major shifts in the content and tone of espionage-oriented films occur roughly at the beginning of each new decade. For example, with many exceptions to the rule, when the clouds of World War II gathered before Pearl Harbor, American and British films began substituting Nazi saboteurs for the homegrown gangsters of old. When the Cold War kicked in at the end of WWII, East European accents and Communist ideology dominated films that were often exercises in propaganda promoting the virtues of the free market and Western democracy. Then, *Dr. No* arrived in 1962, and spy movies were transformed into high-flying escapism featuring Playboy spies on one side, realistic “anti-Bond” characters on the other. Then came films like *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), and the lion’s share of movies thereafter used the Hitchcockian device of having innocent civilians or low-level agents in the field uncertain just who the villains were—our side or theirs?

At the end of the Reagan/Bush era and the collapse of European Communism in 1989, a decade went by with filmmakers looking for new adversaries, usually relying on battles with independent non-political organizations, ruthless corporations, or rogue elements within Russian, U.S., or British intelligence. During the 1990s, as with spy literature and historical non-fiction that came out trying to evaluate the meaning of it all, the main question seemed to be—what was the new role for agencies created for a Cold War that had been won? Hollywood, for the most part, didn't have any answers and tended to simply churn out special-effects popcorn thrillers and explosion fests. Then came September 11, and everything changed again. Or did it?

In the summer of 2009, it occurred to me the timing was right to look back over the first decade of the new millennium and evaluate what, if anything, was new and different in spy movies. One matter was obvious: the success of *The Bourne Identity* changed everything in terms of what audiences craved. Yes, movie-goers wanted taut, suspenseful action-adventure, but responses to the invisible car in *Die Another Day* and the invisible dirigible in *I Spy* signaled ticket buyers didn't want the same old over-the-top spectacles. They wanted believable, fleshed-out characters and scripts that were more than scaffolding for technological wizardry. At least, that's what the reviews and box-office receipts seemed to say.

I wondered what other aficionados and experts in this genre thought, so I posed two questions to some extremely knowledgeable friends—what, in your opinion, were the best spy films released since 2000? Why? Below are some very interesting answers.

When this project began, I didn't know what the final format of this article would be. I suspected I'd list the nominations and reviews using some sort of ranking, the most popular films first, the "Honorable Mentions" at the end. I must credit Craig Arthur for determining the flow I chose, that is, a simple chronological order. When I read his submissions, I easily saw the patterns he wrote about beginning with the heavy-action of *Mission: Impossible II* and ending with releases clearly inspired by the Bourne model. Then, my Aussie friend David E. Foster contributed an essay tracing a theme he saw in new films. David looked back to

Enemy of the State (1998) as the movie that established tropes of future films, that of surveillance technology changing not only the “toys” being used, but also the importance that knowledge-based communications devices like cell phones and laptops held in shaping both plots and character relationships. I also thought David’s opening paragraphs on this topic were so good that I used them for a second introduction here, letting Mr. Foster set the stage for what will follow.

I admit, some choices from Craig, David, Anders, Amanda and Paul took me completely by surprise—*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*? I expected multiple accolades for *Casino Royale* but not the in-depth, intriguing defenses of *Die Another Day* or *Quantum of Solace*, two 007 outings largely blasted by most critics. Blockbusters were analyzed in astonishing detail, but also foreign-language releases I’d never heard of. Well, the contributors to this overview came from the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and Japan. I was delighted to see one of my choices, *Spy Game*, was seconded by others. Some nominations, as in *XXX* and *The Recruit* were titles I wouldn’t have included on a dare. However, the plan all along was to include a wide range of opinions, so listing the films chronologically rather than via some ranking seemed to be a fairer, more balanced approach resulting in, I hope, an in-depth overview of what spy films have given us so far in this new century.

I also admit, the themes various contributors wrote about could have perhaps been better presented as independent essays, but integrating all the perspectives here makes this article a rather interesting collaboration of a number of insights. See if you agree. Kick back and relax—this ride is a long one; it is offered in two parts as these writers have much to say.

Note: After the release dates for each film, if more than one nomination or review was submitted, I added a series of *s that indicates how many of the six writers praised the movie, whether or not a review from everyone was included. So a ***** notation is for a film considered very highly—two or three stars signal more than a minority opinion will be discussed in the reviews that follow.

While I'm here, let me call your attention to one issue of *Studies in Intelligence* (Vol. 53, No. 2 [Summer Supplement 2009]) which includes a very dynamic collection of reviews written by professional officers in "Intelligence in Fictional Literature" as well as film and television. You can download the PDF version at:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/special-review-supplement/U-%20Special%20Reviews%20Supplement%20-July%202009.pdf>

Introduction II

by David E. Foster

The spy film has changed quite substantially over the last ten years. Genre conventions that were established in the '60s have made way for a new style of spy thriller where the trusted Walther PPK has been replaced by the Motorola, Nokia, or whichever phone company has paid the most for product placement. But before we look at this decade past, I first thought it was worth revisiting three key films - building blocks if you will - that were instrumental in laying the foundations for the evolution of the spy film in the twenty-first century.

Firstly, we have Phil Noyce's *Patriot Games* (1992), in which there is a small sequence where Jack Ryan (Harrison Ford) is in a command centre watching via satellite, images of an incursion on a terrorist base in the desert. This small section, at the time, was quite groundbreaking, setting the foundations for a new style of spy thriller. Ones where logic and information are the tools for power rather than guns or gadgets.

This small snippet of hi-tech mayhem was expanded upon in Mimi Leder's *The Peacemaker* (1997), wherein the use of 'intel' and satellite imaging is quite frightening in its depiction. There is almost a 'Big Brother' aspect to the military's use of technology in tracking down their subjects.

And finally, the new age of hi-tech intelligence gathering reached its logical evolution in Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998). *Enemy of the State*'s influence has built in momentum and filtered through the spy films and television through the first decade of the twenty-first century. *Enemy of the State* was the first film to build the whole story around that technology. And while you can argue that *Enemy of the State* isn't a really great spy film (it works better as a paranoid thriller in the style of *The Pallalax View*), its influence has affected the way people approach making spy films.

What is the key difference between these three *films* and the spy movies that came before them? The answer is simple – two words – 'Real Time'.

The Bourne films, the Daniel Craig Bonds, *Body of Lies*, the television show 24 all owe their continuous intelligence style to *Enemy of the State*. For example, you no longer need the briefing scene. Communications and intel gathering have evolved so much, there is no need for direct contact. It's now done via laptop, through an earpiece, and/or a mobile phone. So, let's look at some of the more successful espionage films of the 'noughties' and see how high-tech and other trends played out.



Mission: Impossible 2*(2000) **

Veteran screenwriter Robert Towne took plot elements from two Season One episodes of the *Mission: Impossible* TV series – combining the bacteriological warfare MacGuffin from “The

Carriers” with the undercover seduction role Cinnamon Carter is called upon to perform in “The Short Tail Spy” – and blends them into a literal remake of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Notorious*. This provides the movie with a better narrative structure and emotional involvement than the first three Pierce Brosnan Bond movies. Thandie Newton gives an elegant and captivating performance as a jewel thief recruited to infiltrate the enemy camp of her ex-lover just as Ingrid Bergman had done in *Notorious*. Sir Anthony Hopkins gives a steely performance as Ethan Hunt’s (Tom Cruise) boss. However, the other characters and dialogue are, for the most part, very flat, rendering the movie a tad unfulfilling. John Woo’s directing style is largely to blame here, though his action sequences are – as usual in a Woo film – loud and impressive, replete with Hong Kong style fighting that was such a hit in *The Matrix*. (Craig Arthur)

M: I-2, as the film is more widely known, was a huge box-office success but it garnered a mediocre critical reception. Like the similarly received *Quantum of Solace*, the film is a thrill ride that you simply have to surrender to and is excellent entertainment. It moves like a rocket, it’s beautifully photographed by Jeffrey Kimball (mainly in Sydney, Australia), has some great Robert Towne dialogue (uncredited Anthony Hopkins scenes with Cruise just crackle), a nice plotline homage to Hitchcock’s *Notorious* (1946) and most prominently, courtesy of John Woo (this is his best Hollywood film), some incredible action sequences. *M:I-2* is a silly, beautiful, sexy, breathlessly thrilling action yarn with a surprising sense of heart and for all intents and purposes is a surrogate James Bond picture. If you ever wondered what a John Woo 007 movie would look and feel like, well, watch this movie. (Paul Rowlands)

The three *Mission: Impossible* films starring Tom Cruise as agent “Ethan Hawke” –*Mission: Impossible* (1996), *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000), and *Mission: Impossible 3* (2006) – are enjoyable and exciting action films, but, in my eyes they cannot match up to the level of excitement and well-written scripts of the Jason Bourne series.

The *Mission: Impossible* films stand alone from the 1966 to 1973 TV-series with the same name but of course there are similarities. Entertaining wise, these films gave full value to cinema goers as they feature some wonderful action sequences primarily thanks to talented stunt coordinators Greg Powell (*MI-1*), Brian Smrz (*MI-*

2) and Vic Armstrong (*MI-3*). Tom Cruise is a brilliant actor and he makes solid performances as “Ethan Hawke”. The supporting actors, especially in the second film, with the raw Dougray Scott (once rumored to be the new James Bond) and the gorgeous Thandie Newton are good casting choices as well. (*Anders Frejdh*)



Enigma (2001) **

Although the historical liberties are modest compared to Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglorious Basterds*, this big-screen adaptation of Robert Harris’s novel, from *The World is Not Enough* director Michael Apted, was nevertheless controversial in its fictionalised treatment of World War II events. A fictional character, Tom Jericho (Dougray Scott) substitutes for the real life Alan Turing. Turing was gay, whereas Jericho is seduced by the glamorous, enigmatic Claire Romilly (Saffron Burrows), who may or may not be a German spy. So this is not a docudrama but an engaging intrigue and vintage thriller designed to keep audiences on the edge of their seats. Jericho’s psychological fragility recalls that of Arthur Rowe in Graham Greene’s novel *The Ministry of Fear* and the subsequent Fritz Lang movie version, while the action recalls John Buchan. John Barry’s haunting score is superb, proving once again that he is the greatest ever composer of spy movie music. (Craig Arthur)

Scripted by Tom Stoppard from the Robert Harris bestseller and produced by Sir Mick Jagger, *Enigma* is based on the true story of how the code breakers at Bletchley Park in the UK cracked the Enigma code during WW2, enabling them to save many British submarines from being sunk by the Nazis. Both the film and 1995 novel were criticized for substituting a different character (Dougray Scott’s Tom Jericho) for the real code breaker Alan Turing. *Enigma* adds to the real story by including a doomed romance between Scott and Saffron

Burrows that wouldn't have been possible with the real Turing character, who was in fact a homosexual.

A good, old-fashioned wartime thriller, *Enigma* is very British and could have been made fifty or so years ago. Its assets are a strong story, a very human romance, understated humour and a nice performance from national treasure Kate Winslet as Jericho's mousy, bespectacled sidekick. Jeremy Northam is also worth a mention as the suave MI5 agent paying close attention to Jericho's state of mind. John Barry's excellent score adds so much to the film that it makes one sad that he doesn't score as many films as he did. In an era of intelligence being substituted for bombastic pyrotechnics, *Enigma* is a real breath of fresh air and an interesting dramatization of a fascinating real-life story. (Paul Rowlands)



The Tailor of Panama* (2001) **

It is no secret that John Le Carre dislikes James Bond. His early novels especially were a reaction against Ian Fleming. And although Le Carre took his inspiration for *The Tailor of Panama* from Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, Andrew Osnard, the manipulative MI6 opportunist in this tale of an intelligence fabricator, bears more than a passing similarity to Bond. A kind of anti-Bond whose self-centred ambitions create nothing but suffering and even death for those around him. So who better to play Osnard in the movie version than Pierce Brosnan, appearing in *The Tailor of Panama* between Bond movies? Brosnan gives a superb performance as this unsympathetic rogue. Simultaneously Geoffrey Rush evokes considerable pity and fear in audiences as he brings the all-too-human titular tailor of

Panama to life. The location filming creates an atmosphere of spellbinding authenticity.
(Craig Arthur)

Pierce Brosnan is a disgraced MI6 agent exiled to Panama years after the US handover (John Le Carre's 1996 novel was set before the event). His casting brings up interesting parallels to his role as 007 - his character, Osnard, is as ruthless, highly-sexed and resourceful as 007, but lacks Bond's sophistication, charm and morality. In the book, an acknowledged homage to Graham Greene's 1958 novel *Our Man in Havana*, Osnard even looks similar to 007 with an equally similar background. It's obvious the character is meant to represent what an unromanticised and unexaggerated 007 might be really like.

So it's fitting that Brosnan was cast, and he delivers a superb performance as the unlikeable spy who has no qualms about manipulating his colleagues, the Panamanian authorities and duplicitous tailor Harry Pendel (the great Geoffrey Rush) and creating a fake war in order to make himself a huge payday. He exhibits depths hitherto unseen (and expanded upon in the later *The Matador*) and the extra ingredient of humour to the serious plotline is both intriguing and refreshing. (Paul Rowlands)

Two Bonds took turns in Le Carre films, Sean Connery in *The Russia House* (book, 1989; film, 1990) and Pierce Brosnan in *A Tailor in Panama* (book, 1996; film, 2001). The former was considered a response to the end of the Cold War, where a British publisher (Connery) was drawn into espionage by a Soviet woman (Michelle Pfeiffer). The latter, a low-key and under-appreciated project co-starring Geoffrey Rush, Jamie Lee Curtis and Harold Pinter, had Brosnan Working to set up a new MI6 network in Panama, a setting far from typical in the espionage genre which served as a reminder of how far flung the Cold War manipulations had been during the proxy wars between East and West. Brosnan's character made one statement emblematic of the period: "People don't want to know about the glorious past exploits of some shagged out old wino. They want the real stuff. Today's men. Tomorrows, not yesterdays." This observation summed up directions for many a film to follow.
(Wesley Britton)



Spy Game (2001) ***

Tony Scott returned to the spy biz with *Spy Game* starring Robert Redford and Brad Pitt. By any standard, this is one of the best espionage films ever made and certainly the best at trying to capture the history of the CIA--far better than 2006's *The Good Sheppard*. The film is grounded in realism, human relationships, and a scope far beyond what most other films even attempt. On top of all this, the art direction in *Spy Game* was innovative as Scott filmed flashbacks in the style of movies from different time periods. For example, the Vietnam sequences were edited to look black-and-white with a green tint. The Berlin of the 1980s was filmed with the enhanced colors characteristic of movies of the era.

In his DVD commentary, Scott pointed to the father-son relationship of the Redford-Pitt characters as the central theme of the movie, a very different spin on the learned mentor-wise-ass novice motif in other films. In this story, Redford sacrificed his life savings to go around the agency on his last day of work to get Pitt out of prison. On another level, *Spy Game* was one of the first espionage films to feel the impact of 9/11. *Spy Game*'s climactic moment involved a suicide bomber bringing down a building in Beirut, so Scott found he needed to make the scene "less operatic" and more linear. Screenings 10 days after 9/11 showed audience response even more favorable than before, although Scott speculated for a few seconds, audiences would be out of the movie, thinking on its parallels to recent events. For a brief time, Universal held off release of the film, but all Hollywood quickly saw audiences were quickly rebounding from the images of the Trade Towers collapse. But the thought that went into the production on all levels paid off in a film that is artistic, fast-paced, and very human. (Wesley Britton)

"The technology gets better all the time – that's fine. Most of the time all you need is a stick of gum, a pocket knife and a smile," Robert Redford's character, Nathan Muir, explains when

recruiting the young Tom Bishop (Brad Pitt), highlighting that this is a movie about the human side of tradecraft, dealing with a more realistic kind of espionage than in *Mission: Impossible 2* or *Bond*. The movie features great performances from Redford and Pitt, in a look at a father-son type relationship where the recruit becomes disillusioned with the ruthlessness of his mentor. Events that transpire on the day of his retirement, however, trigger Muir to reassess his perspective and show a rounded side to his character. The gritty Cold War Europe, Middle Eastern, and Chinese locations are presented in a slick manner typical of a Tony Scott film, a type of heightened reality that gives their lack of glamour a stylised, glamorous aesthetic. This aspect of the movie had an obvious impact on the intended look and feel of the North Korean settings of *Die Another Day* a year later. (And Christian Wagner would edit both movies, incorporating his trademark 'ramped' video effects.) (Craig Arthur)

Spy Game is the story of two men: Nathan Muir (Robert Redford) and Tom Bishop (Brad Pitt). Muir is retiring from the CIA at the end of the day but is called in to assist with the fallout from Bishop being arrested trying to free his lover, Elizabeth Hadley (Catherine McCormack) from a Chinese prison.

The Chinese government will execute him within 24 hours unless the US government claims him. Since Bishop was acting on his own, it quickly becomes clear that the CIA are going to throw him to the wolves, especially since he is threatening a trade deal the U.S. President is about to sign off on with China.

Much of the pleasure of the film is learning new information step by step, so I don't want to spoil the experience, but suffice to say that Muir and Bishop have a history together. Muir recruited Bishop but they had a falling out over ethics. Despite Muir being a dyed in the wool CIA man, he isn't willing to let his ex-colleague and friend die to ensure a good trade relationship between the US and China. But he has little time, little influence, and few tools at his disposal. He will have to use all his skills to ensure Bishop's freedom but use them against the organization he gave his life to serve in.

Brad Pitt had for a while been considered the modern equivalent to the Robert Redford of the '60's and '70's, and Redford had cast him in his film *The River Runs Through It* (1992) in a role that Redford would have played had he been a lot younger. When it was announced that the pair would be teaming up for a spy thriller with Tony Scott, expectations ran high. As a result, upon first viewing, *Spy Game* can be an underwhelming experience mainly due to these expectations. Nothing really becomes clear in the plot until the final moments. There aren't many action sequences. It's quite a dense, talky, serious film. Most of the film takes place in flashbacks. Scott's directorial style might seem too energetic and erratic for what is basically a '70's thriller in the style of Redford's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). And crucially, Redford and Pitt have fewer scenes together than you might hope.

But the film won't leave your mind after your first viewing and you will want to return. The greatest quality that *Spy Game* has is a lot of heart. The script makes it clear that the 'spy game' requires ruthlessness and coldness, but in the end even Redford's character realizes that friendship and solidarity are even more important. The finale of the film is unexpectedly touching, especially if people had expected a macho, patriotic thriller from the director of *Top Gun* (1986).

Redford and Pitt not only make a great team, sharing considerable chemistry, but their characters offer two divergent viewpoints of espionage for the audience to chew on and consider for the duration of the movie. Is Pitt naive and over-emotional when he tells Redford that even in espionage there is always a right and wrong thing to do? Or is Redford right when he tells him that espionage is indeed a 'game' where only the final results are important? We are led to believe throughout the film that probably the older, mature and experienced CIA agent Redford is wiser, but by the end even Redford cannot bring himself to obey the rules of the game and sacrifice his friend.

Perhaps the final message of the film is that, yes, ruthlessness and clear-thinking are necessary in espionage, but also empathy and humanity.

Spy Game deserves a lot of attention not just as a spy film but as a movie in general. It's amongst the best Redford, Pitt and Scott have ever done. It's a thinking man's action thriller and shows that the spy genre doesn't need to be all about pyrotechnics, technology and cornball humour. Scott's film is a thrilling two hours that is also compelling, full of incident and twists and turns, interesting characters and performances. It manages to balance its timescales (the flashbacks and the present day story) remarkably well, and be both a fun and serious thriller in equal measure. Pitt shines as perhaps the CIA agent Redford sees as a younger version of himself and has commanding presence and a nice, light touch. Redford steals the film though as a man ready to retire but not surrender. His character is wonderful - a man who has been in the game a long time and for whom nothing slips by. Muir is always one step ahead of his CIA colleagues and if we don't know exactly what he's up to, then it may be apt, since he probably doesn't either until the final pieces of the game are left to play. I like to think of the film as an unofficial sequel to his brilliant *Three Days of the Condor* where we get to see his character's final days as a CIA agent. *Spy Game* would also seem to be the last opportunity to observe exactly what makes Redford a great cinematic lead - charm, intelligence, unpredictability and hidden depth. Mention should be made too of Daniel Mindel's cinematography, which effortlessly and convincingly places us in different eras and locations (Hong Kong, Hungary, Morocco, Washington, Virginia) in the flashbacks and the present day; the well-laid out and well-paced script (credited to Michael Frost Beckner and David Arata) and a great character performance from British actor Stephen Dillane as the oily, arrogant CIA colleague out to get Redford. But it's Scott who deserves the most plaudits. He transcended expectations - one would have expected a flashy, noisy, technological spy thriller - to focus on characters to create the drama, and to allow the film to breathe and make the final act all the more satisfying. One of the very best spy movies of the decade. (Paul Rowlands)



Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002) *

Many directors and stars had been linked to this film since the late '80s, and it was very nearly made with Johnny Depp in the lead role with Bryan Singer directing. When the project was cancelled, George Clooney took over as director and cast the less well-known but superb Sam Rockwell as the lead. The story of the film is a hugely intriguing one. It's based on the 1974 autobiography of Chuck Barris, who still claims to this day (he was heavily involved in this production and appears as himself at the end of the film) that whilst producing and hosting (vilified) gameshows like *The Gong Show* and *The Dating Game* in the '60's and '70's, he was on the CIA's payroll as an assassin. Such claims, even if they are true, are undoubtedly surreal and as amusing as they are disturbing. The writer of offbeat gems like *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) and *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, 2002), namely Charlie Kaufman, is the perfect man to adapt such a story (although he wasn't happy with the final result). His ambitious, complex, non-linear and perfectly balanced in tone screenplay is complemented by debut director Clooney's restrained and confident direction (homaging the filmic eras of the times the story is set in); Newton Thomas Sigel's astonishing and vivid color palate (his color choices are responsible for much of the unique feel of the film); some amusing supporting roles and cameos (Clooney as the dour recruiting agent, Julia Roberts - whose participation got the film greenlit - as a femme fatale, Drew Barrymore as Barris's long-suffering, spunky girlfriend, Rutger Hauer as a German-American spy, and watch out for Brad Pitt and Matt Damon's brief cameos) but most of all, a tour-de-force, star-making performance from the always excellent Sam Rockwell as the complex soul Chuck Barris. Despite strong reviews and a re-release in the UK, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* was a financial failure and it's a film that requires at least one repeat viewing in order to fully

appreciate its considerable strengths. The biggest shame about the film's little-seen status is that Rockwell's performance is one that no movie fan should want to miss, and Clooney was absolutely right to fight to keep him in the lead. Hopefully films like the recent *Moon* (Duncan Jones, 2009) will give him the exposure he deserves. Anybody interested in the further adventures of Barris might want to check out the recent further autobiography, *Bad Grass Never Dies* (2004). (Paul Rowlands)

The Sum of All Fears* (2002) *

Casino Royale (2006) may have won all the plaudits for 'rebooting' (and improving) the James Bond series, but the Jack Ryan series got there first. After Harrison Ford lost interest in portraying Ryan for a third time, and director Phillip Noyce soon followed suit (after 18 months on the project), it took Ben Affleck's interest in taking over the role of Ryan to prevent the film from cancellation. The decision was made for him to play a much younger Ryan, still a wet behind the ears CIA analyst and in the process of dating his future wife (played by Anne Archer in the Ford movies and here by Bridget Moynahan from *The Recruit*). (In the Ford draft, like the 1991 Tom Clancy novel, Ryan was Deputy Director of the CIA.) But the studio and production team also took the opportunity to make a less action-oriented picture and more of a thoughtful, character-driven thriller, hiring Phil Alden Robinson to helm the fourth Ryan installment. He might have been an unconventional choice but he proved to be a perfect one, and as he explained, the film continued his theme of men having to learn to grow up.

The release of *The Sum Of All Fears* was delayed after the events of 9/ 11. The film concerns a group of Neo-Nazis aiming to create a war against Russia and the USA in order to spread their fascist stronghold. (In the book they were Arab nationalists, and Alden Robinson insists the change was made simply for time constraints and plausibility.) In one scene they manage to detonate a small yield nuclear bomb in a baseball stadium in Baltimore where the President

was attending (he barely manages to escape). It's an excellent example of context. Post- 9/11 the scene is horribly chilling and brings back all the feelings of fear, chaos, paranoia and anger that we all experienced. It's all the more effective for its restraint (no changes were made post- 9/11). We see the effect of the blast on the hospital where Ryan's girlfriend works, and the aftermath (there's a haunting shot of the mushroom cloud that helps to make the attack very realistic). We also get to see the physical and mental trauma it unleashes on the major characters (as in the President's willingness to take revenge).

Affleck does a great job as Ryan and has fun showing the character from a new angle - his reluctance to be a field agent, his streak of stubbornness, his ability to read people and situations correctly and his clear-headedness at all times signaling that this man will definitely grow to become the Ryan as portrayed by Ford. It's a shame that his ill-deserved fall from grace with the media prevented him reprising the role. But it's Morgan Freeman who steals the show as Ryan's mentor (a la James Earl Jones in the first three films). His scenes opposite Affleck are the best in the picture, for they share both good chemistry and good dialogue. As ever, Freeman brings class, charm and authenticity to his role and to the film. The pair are backed up by quite a remarkable cast that includes the hitherto little-seen (and now late) Alan Bates as the villain, Liev Schreiber as the reluctant field agent John Clark (hero of other Clancy books and played by William Dafoe in *Clear and Present Danger*, 1994) and James Cromwell as the President.

This is the way it should be done. The best genre films accept the traditions but try to break new ground within those restrictions. They are also believable within the parameters of the worlds they create. *The Sum Of All Fears* isn't an essay in social realism, it's a spy thriller. But it shows perfectly the difference an artistically sensitive production team, well-cast actors, a strong script, a clear and concise plot, and most of all, intelligence and good humour, can make. The film's message as well couldn't be all the more prescient and important: in a time of war, don't rush to retaliate, but gather information first. As we all have seen, rushing in to

retaliate can lead to disastrous consequences. Alden Robinson has certainly succeeded in his aim to make 'a cautionary tale about terrorism', but he has also made the best in the Jack Ryan series and one of the finest spy movies of the decade. (Paul Rowlands)

It's well known that one spy-writer who doesn't like Tom Clancy films is Tom Clancy. Of course, his main beef is that Hollywood finds it difficult to streamline his complex novels into workable scripts. That is, if one expects literal adaptations.

Director Phil Alden Robinson's *post 9/11 effort, Sum of All Fears*, made no attempt to be literal, but none of the other Clancy films to date worked so hard to retain the flavor of the novelist's multi-layered approach to story-telling. In addition, the movie was clear evidence Hollywood wanted to keep current issues at arm's length. In the 1991 Clancy novel, Jack Ryan was Deputy Director of the CIA, but in the movie Ben Affleck took Ryan back to being a neophyte CIA analyst. Some Arab groups believed their pressure helped change the terrorists from Muslim extremists in the book into neo-Nazis in the film. Despite the few films that had entered this arena, script-writers claimed bad Arabs were becoming cliché' and that fanatic nationalists are a more universal villain in today's world. Perhaps so—the real point was Robinson and Affleck *made* one of the best adaptations of a Clancy novel, the streamlined *Patriot Games* and Sean Connery's running away with *Hunt For Red October* notwithstanding.

The movie grossed almost \$150 million as of 2006 and even the cranky Clancy admitted in DVD commentary the film was a good piece of work. It was. (Wesley Britton)



The Quiet American (2002) **

Far from the Bond breed of spy, Michael Caine starred in the highly regarded 2002 remake of *The Quiet American*, the first Hollywood movie to be filmed in Vietnam with the blessings of the Communist government. According to Roger Ebert, in this second adaptation of Graham Greene's 1955 novel, Caine played the jaded journalist Fowler "in a performance that seems to descend perfectly formed. There is no artifice in it, no unneeded energy, no tricks, no effort. It is there . . . The film is narrated by Caine's character, in that conversational voice weary with wisdom; we are reminded of the tired cynicism of the opening narration in the great film of Greene's *The Third Man*."

In commentary for the DVD release, director Philip Noyce said Caine was cast as Fowler because he was an actor who could bring humanity and trust to a character that could be a potential problem for audiences. After all, Fowler was an older, married man involved with a much younger girl (19 years old). Casting Brenden Fraser as the third part of the romantic triangle was problematic as well. In the novel, Alden Pyle was largely a polemic figure who spouted off idealistic phrases without much character depth. When a bomb he plants kills innocent civilians instead of a military parade, Greene's Pyle simply believes the cause of democracy must include such "collateral damage." All involved said this was the major change between novel and film, giving Fraser a more rounded character so he could be something of an equal with Caine for dramatic purposes. Actual CIA agents were brought in to make him more flesh-and-blood.

As it turned out, the first test screenings of the movie in New York took place the night before 9/11. Not surprisingly, Merrimax distributors became reluctant to release a film with violence that would turn off movie goers in the U.S. (In Viet Nam, ticket sales were destroyed not because of public disfavor, but because so many bootleg copies became available with poor quality videos being sold outside of theatres.) But Michael Caine intervened with Harvey Weinstein at Merrimax to show *The Quiet*

American at film festivals where critical response was high. It's rare that a remake equals or bests an original, and this one is an exception to the rule. (Wesley Britton)

Graham Greene's 1955 novel had already been filmed in 1958 but this is the superior version, an atmospheric, beautifully photographed and compelling drama that has the added value of being more faithful to the book. The events that later led to the Vietnam War are always very present in the background but this is mainly a story about morality and betrayal. It's grounded by a literate screenplay, restrained direction from Noyce (taking a break from blockbusters

like *Patriot Games* (1992)), beautiful cinematography and nuanced performances from the excellent Michael Caine and the revelatory Brendan Fraser. The story is also very much prescient to the events that led to 9/11. (Paul Rowlands)

XXX (2002)

Four years before *Casino Royale* rebooted the Bond series wonderfully, the team behind XXX declared tuxedoed superspies to be old hat and killed off theirs in the opening sequence. Billed as 'James Bond for Generation Y', and substituting the snobbery, high culture and charm of 007 for extreme sports hijinks, hip-hop fashion and brashness, XXX is a movie that gets to have its cake and eat it: despite it's attempts to distance itself from Mr. Bond, it's a thinly disguised pastiche. Seven years down the line, it's surprising how much fun a simple spin on Bond can be. Upon it's release it seemed a pretty hollow and unimaginative experience (the plot is weak and yes, the characters are not the deepest...but the film's sense of fun is infectious.) But it's clear that the creative team know their way around a spy movie, and they have fun with all the possibilities of having an anarchic, thrillseeking, popular culture-loving enemy of the state as their superspy.

Vin Diesel is cool and amusing as Xander Cage, aka XXX, and the ubiquitous Samuel L. Jackson, complete with a scarred face, is the NSA operative who gives him a simple choice: spy on a group of Eastern European terrorists or face a long sentence in prison for his

previous misdeeds. Marton Csokas is unfortunately hammy as the villain, but the earthily beautiful Asia Argento makes a sexy 'X' girl. There's even a 'Q' type character in Michael Roof's Agent Shavers. As we all know, the film didn't blow 007 off the screen, but it did spawn a mediocre sequel, *XXX: State of the Union* (aka *XXX: The Next Level*) (2005), ironically helmed by Lee Tamahori, who directed the Bond film that competed with the original at the box-office – *Die Another Day* (2002). Despite being killed off in a short film, *The Final Chapter: The Death of Xander Cage* (2005) and Ice Cube playing a different 'XXX' in the Tamahori sequel, Diesel and Cohen will reprise Xander Cage for a 2011 sequel. (Paul Rowlands)

***Cypher* (2002)**

Sometimes innovative, brilliant films get lost in the marketplace and never really get the chance to be seen. *Cypher*, aka *Brainstorm* or *Company Man* in some territories, is a strong example. Despite sharing the Canadian director of the acclaimed *Cube* (1997) and featuring Lucy Liu from *Charlie's Angels* (2000), the film took three years to reach the US and then died without a trace.

Cypher is a futuristic spy thriller full of haunting and twisted imagery and set pieces; twists upon twists upon twists and is a complete blast from start to finish. Jeremy Northam (one of the candidates for Bond in *Goldeneye*, 1995) is a bored, unhappy 'company man' who suddenly decides to become an industrial spy and who very quickly begins to enjoy the freedom a new identity delivers. However, he soon finds out he cannot trust anybody he meets, including the sexy and mysterious Lucy Liu. His efforts to unravel whether his employers are trying to brainwash him only serve to make the 'rabbit holes' all the more deep.

The movie borrows set pieces and ideas from the first two *Mission: Impossible* films (1996, 2000), *True Lies* (1994) and *The Matrix* (1999). But the way the

whole film is executed is original all the way through. That it was all done on a \$7.5m budget (the effects are mostly seamless) is quite astonishing. It's a light, fun movie but also a film that requires your complete attention.

Northam gives a fantastically multi-faceted performance, and is our window into what at times is a complex world. His character at first is like a perfect opposite to his Enigma (2001) character: eager to please, repressed and lacking in confidence. Northam has fun with the character's transformation into quite a different persona. Lucy Liu also enjoys her role as the possible femme fatale who might be leading him to his doom or his liberation. Director Natali always ensures there is something to look at, and enough humour and incident to make the time fly by (the film is a very snippy 95 minutes long).

Brian King's script is very clever, intelligent and constructed like an addictive puzzle. Michael Andrews's moody, sombre, restrained score is perfect for the confusing and mysterious world of the picture. Compelling, unique, stylish. Cerebral, breezy and compact. Cypher is perfect evidence of the elasticity and timelessness of the spy genre. Since any human being is capable of spying or espionage, the spy movie can comfortably weld itself to almost every genre. It always has and always will. And every so often you get a great spy thriller that crosses genres in an exciting way and makes one look at the genre from a different angle. Cypher is such a movie and deserves to be seen. (Paul Rowlands)



Die Another Day (2002) **

Although probably the weakest of Pierce Brosnan's four Bond movies, this movie still has many positive attributes. The idea of having Bond imprisoned in North Korea for an extended length of time, of stripping the character of all the usual trappings, is *bold* and original, blending the Bondian fantasy world with the gritty visual textures of *Spy Game*, *The Chairman*, and *The Ipccress File*. The plot cleverly incorporates plot elements from Ian Fleming's *Moonraker* melded into a storyline similar to Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*. *Die Another Day* in some respects remains truer to the *Moonraker* novel than many of the Bond films that are direct adaptations of Fleming titles. Aside from the villain's space project, constructed in full public view, and his use of plastic surgery to completely transform his appearance, elements of the Fleming story such as the high-tech shooting-range beneath Universal Exports' HQ (it becomes a virtual reality simulation in the movie) and the use of Blades club in both the novel and movie. In hindsight, however, compared to *The Bourne Identity*, *Die Another Day* belongs to the baroque style-over-substance excesses of action movies like *Charlie's Angels* (2000) in the wake of *The Matrix*. The problem is, as M says to Bond in the movie, while he was away, growing a beard in a North Korean prison, "the world changed." Bond movies could no longer afford to be so insulated from real world events. (Craig Arthur)

As Pierce Brosnan himself noted, the filmmakers threw in 'everything but the kitchen sink' for the 20th official James Bond film (released on the series' 40th anniversary). Unfortunately this approach created mixed results (certainly Brosnan's weakest entry), and *Die Another Day* (the title stems from A.E.Housman's poem 'A Shropshire Lad!') is a Bond film that divides fans. When the film is good, it is very good. When it isn't good, it's pretty bad. As with the likes of *Octopussy* (1983), its ambitiousness has created an erratic movie in which one has to ignore the disappointing aspects to find and enjoy the positive qualities the film has to offer.

So what's wrong with Brosnan's swansong as 007?

The main problem is that it's a film in three quite separate acts, and the second and third don't mesh at all with the much stronger first act. Setting aside some woeful CGI, some weak

acting, poor dialogue (lo and behold, even the humour is below par) and unconvincing back-projection, the first act is quite thrilling and groundbreaking. After a terrific North Korea-set pre-credits sequence involving 007 and his nemesis, Colonel Tan-Sun Moon (Will Yun Lee, his character's moniker making the first series reference to a non-Fleming Bond novel, Kingsley Amis's 1968 *Colonel Sun*) battling on hovercrafts along the mine-encrusted DM Zone, for the first time in the official series we see the story continue through the main titles. The experimental nature of Madonna's techno theme song is another first, and despite being a sizeable hit it upset a lot of traditional Bond fans. Laid over the track are Daniel Kleinman fire and ice motifs that show us the brutal torture suffered by Bond when he's imprisoned in North Korea for 14 months. The first shot post-titles is of a bedraggled, cuffed and heavily bearded Bond in his prison cell. The boldness and exhilaration of such a plotline presages *Casino Royale* by four years.

Bond is traded for the terrorist Zao (Rick Yune), the accomplice of Colonel Moon, and his '00' status is rescinded by 'M'. 007, sure he was betrayed by someone in North Korea escapes MI6 custody and travels to Cuba via Hong Kong to find the culprit. (Very *Licence to Kill*, 1989.) North Korea, Hong Kong and Cuba make nicely contrasting locations, and it is the latter location where we first meet NSA agent Jinx (Halle Berry).

Halle Berry's character was meant to represent Bond's female equivalent. She's as ruthless, highly-sexed and resourceful as he, and the pair quickly get hot and steamy in Cuba (in a scene too hot for US censors, requiring trimming). Her entrance out of the sea in an orange bikini is a direct homage to Ursula Andress in *Dr. No*. It's one of many references to the Bond movies and novels littered throughout the picture. Some are fun, some are distracting. Despite the potential of Jinx as a foil for Bond, nothing in the writing or Berry's performance makes Jinx appealing or noteworthy. Surprisingly, she nearly got her own film (*Jinx*), written by the film's scribes (Neal Purvis and Robert Wade) and to be directed by Stephen Frears. Its less fantastical nature supposedly influenced the choice and style of *Casino Royale*.

Berry's performance isn't the only disappointing one however. Toby Stephens is particularly hammy as Graves. It might be that the intention of the character is to be a caricature of Bond himself, but it doesn't work. The character is irritating. Rosamund Pike, at 23, is one of the youngest Bond girls, and her youthful energy and beauty are appealing. But the 'frostiness' of her character (Graves's PA, Miranda Frost) makes her performance very one-dimensional. Michael Madsen appears as Jinx's NSA superior, and although he is indeed one of the coolest actors alive, he is curiously over-emphatic and self-conscious here. Madonna makes an uncredited cameo as Miranda Frost's fencing instructor in the 'Blades' sequence. She is a beautiful and sexy woman, but she has been shot here to look, well, let's say not at her best. Her cameo is unnecessary and takes one out of the film.

The first act promises a grittier, dramatic revenge thriller. However once Bond travels to Iceland to investigate Gustav Graves, the film becomes a different beast. The Iceland sequences do boast a spectacular car chase across frozen lakes, but the revelation of the true nature of Graves's identity is very hard to swallow and the CGI in Bond's escape from Graves's Ice Palace is the single worst artistic mistake in the franchise. It's jaw-droppingly unconvincing and it doesn't help that the nature of his escape is also ridiculous. The middle third of the film is also quite camp and over-the-top and it's an unpleasant surprise after the promising first act. Graves's dastardly plan when all is said and done is a reprise of the *Diamonds Are Forever* plot, which was insubstantial the first time round.

Unfortunately the final act is even worse, involving an Antonov plane plummeting to the ground with Bond and Jinx fighting the baddies and our heroes escaping the plane in a helicopter that they desperately try to get working whilst it falls from the sky. It sounds exciting but the abundance of CGI robs any tension or suspense. Jinx's onboard fight with Frost is well-staged but when she manages to kill Frost, one might find themselves thinking the wrong character died.

So why should one bother with *Die Another Day*?

Pierce Brosnan continues his formidable portrayal of James Bond. He fully inhabits the role to the extent that the role is seemingly second nature now. Brosnan always managed to find the dual nature of the character effortlessly - his charm and humour can easily switch to steeliness and ruthlessness without losing audience appeal. His flinty but dramatic approach deserves a less fantastical and often slight movie. His performance in *Die Another Day* serves to ground the film as much as humanly possible. Daniel Craig's very different interpretation has led to a small backlash amongst some fans, but Brosnan is an actor who is easily undervalued. Like Roger Moore he is capable of much more than his charm and good looks suggest. Anybody thinking otherwise about Brosnan should focus on his best dramatic scenes in the Bond series and his remarkable turns in *The Tailor of Panama* (2001) and *The Matador* (2005).

Bond's confrontation with Graves in Iceland is superbly handled by Brosnan, all steeliness and suppressed anger. It reminds us that the first act promised a revenge thriller. Rick Yune as Zao gives a committed performance and it's a pity that Zao is a ridiculous villain. True, he's as ridiculous as Jaws in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) and *Moonraker* (1979), but his albinosque, diamond-encrusted appearance is the sum of the character. Jaws was at least menacing, amusing and human. Special mention must go to the wonderful Emilio Echevarria as the 'sleeper' agent Bond awakens in Cuba, Raoul. In just a few scenes he manages to create a vibrant, intriguing character that recalls Pedro Armendariz's unforgettable Kerim Bey in *From Russia With Love*.

Fans of the books will enjoy how much of the 1955 *Moonraker* novel has been incorporated in the film. Like Drax in the book, Graves's 'grave' plans and real identity are masked by his status as a patriotic businessman, loved by British society (and royalty). The gift he is preparing to unveil to the world, like Drax, will have dire consequences. Both men have changed their appearance to further their nefarious schemes. In *Moonraker*, Bond first meets Drax in the gentleman's club Blades, here he meets Bond at a fencing club also known as Blades. Bond's fencing duel with Graves is also another series first and an exciting, fun highlight of the film. The book opens with Bond at the MI6 shooting gallery underneath Universal Exports. Later in the film we see Bond in such a location, but we

soon find out it is a virtual reality training exercise. The scene sets up a gag at the end of the film involving Bond and Money Penny (Samantha Bond) and is also a nod to the success of the Bond-themed video games. In earlier drafts of the script, Berry was to have played the villainess and Rosamund Pike's character was named Gala Brand, the heroine of the *Moonraker* novel.

Individual scenes work remarkably well. Brosnan's scenes opposite Judi Dench's 'M' bristle with tension and emotion, particularly their second scene, set in an abandoned underground railway station. It's followed by John Cleese's one and only briefing scene in the series as the new 'Q' (Desmond Llewelyn died in a car accident shortly after the release of the previous picture, 1999's *The World is Not Enough*.) He was buffoonish in his first appearance (the aforementioned film) but here he picks up where Llewelyn left off incredibly well. Hell, even the introduction of the invisible Aston Martin Vanquish works because of Bond's realistic response! The props of previous Bond gadgets in 'Q's workshop are also fun to see.

Lee Tamahori brings a poppy, campy feel to *Die Another Day*. It's a much more energetic, zippier picture than *The World is Not Enough* and moves as fast as *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) and *Quantum of Solace* (2008). Some of the changes he and the creative team made to Bond's universe are fun, thrilling and memorable. But some of them take Bond into areas he's best out of - extreme sports (an effort to beat *XXX*, 2002, at its own game?), CGI-assisted action scenes, and the elevated pitch of the acting. Campiness made *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971) the least entertaining Bond film, and its reappearance in this picture is unwelcome. However, one has to admire the ambition, scope, energy and overall entertainment value of *Die Another Day*. Marking the end of an era, the film is best enjoyed as a flawed celebration of the first four decades of the cinematic 007. In one sense, it's a handy reminder of the strengths and weaknesses of the 007 franchise before it all got reinvented again with the *Casino Royale* reboot, and also a further tentative step into the full-blooded artistic intent of the Daniel Craig films. (Paul Rowlands)

Austin Powers in Goldmember (2002)

The final entry in the Austin Powers franchise benefits greatly from a great comedic performance by Michael Caine (humouring his Harry Palmer role) as Austin's absentee Dad, Nigel Powers. Caine is also given the chance to humour his other iconic '60's films such as *The Italian Job* (1969) and *Alfie* (1966). As well as the return of Dr. Evil (Mike Myers), one of the cinema's most hilarious comic creations ever, Mini-Me (Verne Troyer), Fat Bastard (Myers again),

Basil Exposition (Michael York) and Rob Lowe and Robert Wagner, we have some new characters, the very foxy Foxy Cleopatra (singer Beyonce Knowles) and the villainous Goldmember (Myers again).

As Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (1999) was pretty much a rehash of the original, *Goldmember* is a return to form for the series. Its 1975 setting has a lot of fulfilled comic creative potential and the new characters are extremely funny. Of course, not all the jokes work in an Austin Powers movie, but most of them do in this third episode, some of them concerning the twists to Austin's heritage. There are also some amusing cameos from Tom Cruise, Gwyneth Paltrow, Steven Spielberg, Danny De Vito and Kevin Spacey. (Paul Rowlands)



The Bourne Identity* (2002) ****

Like many movies based on popular novels, director Doug Liman's version of the Robert Ludlum classic suffered most criticism from purists who don't like Hollywood taking liberties with sacred texts. In many cases, keepers of literary flames have a point. In this situation, former independent producer Liman took on the project for his own love of the book and gained support from Ludlum, taking five

years to make the Matt Damon vehicle a reality. He kept the premise of Ludlum's book, that of a secret agent with amnesia, but added many details based on his knowledge of the Iran-Contra affairs of the Reagan administration.

Liman must be credited with a screenplay emphasizing character development and drama first, action second. While the director doesn't like the term "thinking man's spy," he stressed the fights in the film were character driven, as Damon's Jason Bourne had to discover his skills even though he didn't know where they came from. To demonstrate mind over fists, Damon tore a map off a wall and consulted it before a getaway. In promotions for the film, Damon pointed to this as an example of the quality of the script--most secret agents just jump in a car and race off as if they know where they're going. Filmed in seven countries, including Hungary, Italy, and France, the attention to detail gave the film's series of settings a level of realism unneeded in other blockbusters where explosions and allegedly witty dialogue are the point. But, of course, connections to past masters remain obvious. Bourne and Maria (Franka Potente) are but the newest pair in the tradition of *The 39 Steps*, a reluctant couple pulled into matters far removed from ordinary life. (Wesley Britton)

Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity* had been filmed before as a TV mini series starring Richard Chamberlain, and while it was fairly faithful to the book, it unconsciously highlighted some of the clichés inherent in the story. When Doug Liman remade it as a movie, he dumped a lot of the contrived spyjinx and turned the story into a tight, cohesive and intelligent spy drama. One of the key elements to the film is 'knowledge'. From the moment Jason Bourne arrives at the Bank in Zurich, he is being watched. Street cameras, satellites, phone records, past associations; everything and anything is at Treadstone's fingertips for use in their hunt for the elusive Jason Bourne. Equally Bourne is adept at gathering intel. He may not have the resources of those hunting him, but he thinks on his feet.

One of my favorite sequences in the film occurs as Bourne tries to escape from the US Embassy in Zurich. First he obtains a radio and earpiece from one of the security guards on site, so he can listen as security teams search the building trying to locate him. Secondly as he makes his way through the corridors, he takes a fire evacuation map off the wall, so he actually knows where he is going. It seems so simple, yet it once again highlights the importance of knowledge. (David E. Foster)

The Bourne trilogy is often heralded as responsible for the reinvention of the Bond movies. But Bond and Bourne inhabit a wider cinematic universe where super-hero movies, especially Spiderman, also have an impact. In the same way that 1995's *Goldeneye* reflected the character psychology in Tim Burton's 1990s Batman movies, so Jason Bourne and, later, *Casino Royale* offer a more vibrant, youthful style and dour "psychomachia" also visible in *Batman Begins* and Spiderman. Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity*, Bruce Wayne/Batman, Peter Parker/Spiderman, Clark Kent in *Superman Returns* and the Bond of *Casino Royale* are all torn, to some degree, between the expectations and responsibilities placed upon their shoulders and their personal lives. In *The Bourne Identity*, Jason Bourne has amnesia. He does not remember who he is but as he investigates, the more of his old life he discovers, the less he wants to be that person. In keeping to this darker tone, the movie presents the action in an expressionistic manner at times, reminiscent of film noir. Like the mad weather extremes of *Laura*, Bourne and Marie are on the run in a stolen car in a blizzard while, supposedly the same time, insects chirp on a hot Parisian summer night. (Craig Arthur)

When *The Bourne Identity* (very loosely based on the 1980 Robert Ludlum novel) was (finally) released in 2002, it proved to be a minor revelation for an action movie. Here was a film with strong characters, a good plot, a well-written script and all the action a fan of thrillers would demand. Some have proffered the view that the less fantastical, more realistic direction the James Bond series took with *Casino Royale* (2006) was directly influenced by the commercial success of the film.

Matt Damon is unconventional casting but a brilliant choice since he is an actor capable of conveying sincerity and dignity very well. He also handles the fight scenes quite effectively and gracefully. He shares good chemistry with his leading lady, German actress Franka Potente (*Run Lola Run*, 1998). Potente's looks and acting style are both very natural and charming, and she serves to humanise the Bourne character, keep the film grounded in some sort of reality and also guide the audience through the developments of the plot. (One of the

reasons the film works so well is that in Bourne and Marie respectively, we have characters who are as surprised, bewildered and shocked by the unfolding of the plot as we the audience are.) It's nice that it takes an hour for the pair to rip each other's pants off, as it allows for a convincing relationship to develop and is more realistic considering the fact Bourne has other things on his mind!

Liman himself, with his background in independent features such as *Swingers* (1996) and *Go* (1999), was an unconventional choice, but he had been a huge fan of the book since high school and been developing the film himself for a few years. Liman manages to make the film feel like a small, personal film, due to his frequent hand-held shooting and matter-of-fact location filming. (The 'small' even applies to the size of the CIA offices when compared to those that feature in the sequels.) The script, credited to Tony Gilroy and William Blake Herron, is easy to follow and has some good dialogue scenes (such as Bourne expressing his confused state of mind to Marie in the all-night cafe) that develop and open-up the characters successfully. Such scenes allow the film to breathe in a way the sequels never have. Gilroy has stated that he wanted to make a 'simple' and 'intimate' action story and he has succeeded.

The Bourne Identity is definitely a more leisurely paced, character-focused film than its follow-ups, which gives it a high status in the quality stakes. It's interesting that all the characters in the film are defined by the practical things they need to get done. As such, they are easy to understand and identify with. The film boasts an excellently filmed chase scene through the streets, alleyways and steps of Paris, a chase scene in the American Embassy where Bourne surprises himself with his quick-thinking and martial arts prowess, and a final denouement where he finally confronts his pursuers. It has more humour than its rather grim-faced follow-ups, and the action scenes are very easy to follow, unlike the Paul Greengrass-directed follow-ups. Amongst the cast are Walton Goggins from the TV series *The Shield* (2002 -), Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje from *Lost* (2004 -) and Clive Owen as one of the assassins sent to wipe out Bourne.

Prior to the release of the film, Hollywood predicted a disaster and even the film-makers themselves were nervous. Based on a novel over two decades old and set in the Cold War (the book was published in 1980 and written by Robert Ludlum), with a lead actor unproven in the action genre, and featuring a premise almost the same as the under-rated Geena Davis action vehicle *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *The Bourne Identity* was no sure-fire hit. Reports of reshoots and fights between the director, the producers and the studio, plus the fact that action movies were out of fashion and a little taboo during the months after 9/11, only added more for the film-makers to bite their nails about. The finished film works so well that it is surprising to learn that the film was in production for nearly two years, during which time Matt Damon had to drop out of the film for a while to film his scenes for *Oceans Eleven* (2002). (Brad Pitt had to drop out of Liman's *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, 2005, to film his scenes in 2004's *Oceans Twelve*.) The film's release date was delayed from September 2001 to June 2002 and went \$8m over budget due to reshoots demanded by the studio.

In the end, *The Bourne Identity* is the equivalent of a good paperback thriller. Many read novels for the beat notes, the characterization, the character moments that normally don't appear in modern action thrillers. Under the tutelage of indie auteur Liman, *The Bourne Identity* has all these, making it one of the strongest action thrillers of the last few decades. It's a shame original author Robert Ludlum didn't get the chance to see his creation reach millions as a cinematic hero. Like Ian Fleming, he passed away too early to enjoy the real fruits of his success. Ludlum died at the age of 73 from a subdural hemotoma, a year before the film's release. (Paul Rowlands)

The Jason Bourne trilogy with Matt Damon comes straight to mind when thinking about the best spy films in the last decade. Being a Bond aficionado and scholar, I cannot but love these films as they turned out to be a real jump-starter for Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson, kicking off the Bond franchise for many years to come when making the brilliant film *Casino Royale* in 2006 as a real match to the first two Bourne films which were great. Matt Damon is excellent in the role as Jason Bourne, the film scripts are well made and the excitement upon watching these films keeps you on the edge and makes you entertained for many hours. (Anders Frejdh)

Spy Sorge (2003)

This picture was little-seen outside of Japan and is probably hard to find unless one imports the DVD from Asia. It's definitely worth seeking out, despite its flaws. *Spy Sorge* tells the real-life story of Richard Sorge, a German-Russian who became, according to historians and the likes of Ian Fleming, Tom Clancy and Frederick Forsyth, the world's greatest spy. Sorge was a Communist agent, stationed in Shanghai and then later Tokyo, who fed information back to his Russian spymasters on the Japanese and German 'special relationship', and their individual plans for the upcoming War. His 'work' is considered to have altered history to a formidable degree.

Spy Sorge is a curious film. It's lengthy (around 3 hours long), dense and talky. It has scenes in multiple languages, but most of it is in English. Iain Glen makes an excellent Sorge, but his fellow Asian actors deliver odd performances in English because of their weak pronunciation. It's an epic, ambitious production, but there is an unfortunate abundance of poor CGI.

Still, *Spy Sorge* scores as a historical picture. Any spy fan unfamiliar with Sorge's amazing story

will learn a lot from this film - not only about his exploits but also about the historical events that led to WW2. It's a fascinating story told with passion and restraint. Director Shinoda was so upset by the lack of success of his expensive film that he retired from directing at the age of 72 and after 34 films. (Paul Rowlands)



Spartan (2003) **

The highly-praised, if under watched Spartan deserves special recognition for writer-director David Mamet's script and the thoughtful character portrayals by Val Kilmer and the rest of this well-chosen cast. In this story of a President's daughter kidnapped and sent into white slavery, "nameless agents in nameless organizations" are called on to do the nation's business and are often on their own knowing their missions are unsanctioned and their orders only inferred and not stated. This theme was underlined in the unspecified situations in the film. For example, it's never stated the missing girl is the President's daughter but only hinted at in the discussion over her missing Secret Service protection and the cover-up that results.

The values in the film, according to Val Kilmer, are carried by the "nameless agents" who are efficient, poised, mentally and physically tough, and who expect to die in service to their country. True, the story included obligatory scenes as when the younger disciple has information his experienced mentor doesn't. But, in Kilmer's view, the movie showed what spies must act like in today's world, often out in the cold whether they play by the book or act in ways both illegal and not officially sanctioned. (Wesley Britton)

David Mamet's film is one that seemed to fall off the radar but it's actually one of the strongest spy pictures of the decade. Anyone familiar with Mamet's work might be able to imagine how the writer/ director of *House of Games* (1987) might put together a spy thriller and they wouldn't be too far off the mark: it's basically a 'conman' movie in the guise of a spy thriller. Like a superior espionage novel, Spartan slowly unfolds its story with brutal and brilliant twists and turns, and his trademark rhythmic dialogue. Val Kilmer has probably never been as good as the Special Ops agent entrusted with the safe retrieval of the President's kidnapped teenaged daughter but finding that there is something not quite right going on in the background. He fits Mamet's love-it-or-hate-it dialogue like a glove. It's amazing how much ground Mamet covers in such a little time - a tribute to how his unique approach to plotting, characterization and dialogue cuts through dense exposition, 2D characters and heavy plotting like a knife. Just go with the ride and Spartan will gradually reveal itself to be one of the most interesting and memorable additions to the spy genre this decade. (Paul Rowlands)

***The Recruit* (2003)**

Colin Farrell is recruited into the CIA training program by Al Pacino but is told he has flunked it, only to be approached by Pacino again with the news that he was failed to enable him to become a NOC (non-official operative). Pacino gives him a new mission: to spy on a female fellow trainee (Bridget Moynahan) whom Farrell fell for and Pacino believes is a mole for a foreign Secret Service. *The Recruit* is silly but well-made fun, and nothing more. And the film knows this and has fun with it. It's a tight, exciting thriller which is a great advert for Farrell's charisma - his scenes opposite Pacino and Moynahan bring the best out of him, especially when Pacino is at his most hammy. The scenes which detail the CIA training program might indeed be laughable but the film itself isn't. In a decade where even the lightest spy films had flawed heroes and stories reflecting our uncertain times, it was nice to have something less ambitious and dark. *The Recruit* fitted the bill nicely. (Paul Rowlands)

(Continued in Part II, Best Spy Films 2004-2009)

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