

Splendor of Truth: Anti-Americanism at the Box Office

This summer's blockbuster movie, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, is as dazzling as it is corrosive.

Hailed by critics and moviegoers alike as the best action movie of the year—possibly the decade—director Paul Greengrass' masterpiece of suspense thrills the audience by producing original and heart-thumping sequences which set a new standard in filmmaking. Greengrass' camera is so intense and quick we are taken right into the unfolding drama; we are Bourne and he is us. The stellar cast includes Matt Damon as the amnesiac Bourne, David Strathairn as the Black Operations section chief and Albert Finney as Dr. Albert Hirsch—all of whom have fittingly served this third and possibly final chapter of the Bourne trilogy with their understated and gritty performances. Yet for all the praise *The Bourne Ultimatum* deserves as a work of art, it is also censorious for advancing a cynical, tormented portrait of American institutions and citizens.

The Bourne Ultimatum fundamentally assaults the CIA and the American government. The movie consists of the search of a CIA assassin, Jason Bourne, for his identity. He is a formidable killing-machine; he is aware of his training as a spy, yet he does not remember how he came to have such outstanding prowess or why American officials are desperately trying to kill him. We follow Bourne on an international chase from London, Paris, Madrid, Turin and Morocco to the United States. Finally Bourne discovers he had volunteered to join a secret CIA operation in which he pledged to give up his past life and assume a new identity in order to serve his country.

In the final analysis, the idealistic and patriotic Bourne who originally renounced his previous existence in order to serve America has been completely transformed: he regards the program he entered as ultimately degrading to his heroic calling and detrimental to the American people. The CIA is depicted as an organization that has lost its moral compass: American citizens are mere guinea pigs in the service of the state. And the ultimate end goals of the American state are obscure: America is not an international benefactor but a pariah. Moreover, the CIA is so convoluted its highest officials have no qualms about spying on their citizens or even assassinating their own agents. Hence, the United States is presented as a state that is in the process of devouring itself.

According to the script, there are faint glimmers of hope for America. Bourne derives assistance from Nicky Parsons, played by Julia Stiles, a fellow CIA agent. She helps him mostly by turning on the CIA: hence American patriotism is inverted. Those who turn on the government are not treasonous but are portrayed as being on the side of the angels. Also, another heroine, internal investigator Pamela Landy, played by Joan Allen, is appalled at the overall direction of the agency and tries to restore order: “This is not us” she declares. Yet, moviegoers are not convinced: the overwhelming portrait is that this is indeed us. Bourne remains a hero not for serving his country or working tirelessly to correct the corruption he has found but by abandoning his original mission and disappearing from the reaches of the American government.

This movie is essentially a modernist haven: Bourne is the ultimate lost soul. In the first place, he literally does not know who he is. And when he discovers the truth—and learns that he is ultimately responsible for his own fate, he is not full of self-recrimination but retains an indignant, defiant stand against the CIA as though his plight is mostly the government’s fault. The Bourne Ultimatum conveys the youth’s disillusionment and disgust with their elders, their leaders, their nation—and their perpetual angst and restlessness. This disillusionment could be the basis for a grand, heroic effort to restore America to its ideals. Yet the characters in this movie are so adrift they no longer have ideals nor do they have a clue as to how to go about restoring a just civil society. The ultimate premise here is that there is no order: there is only the individual mired in his personal and ceaseless quest for an ever-elusive peace while the whole political and social order is determined to crush him.

The Bourne Ultimatum has been compared by critics to other movie masterpieces—in particular to the suspense thrillers of Hitchcock and to the series of films about the British secret agent, James Bond. Yet, Hitchcock always retains a fundamentally Christian worldview in his work: good and evil are clearly defined; the hero restores the moral order, the villain pays a price either by the punishment of his society, the intolerable pain of his own conscience or the wrath of the supernatural. For Hitchcock there is no escaping the natural and eternal moral order. The Bond series presents a mercenary spy who will callously bed women to advance the interests of the state or to serve his own vanity and pleasure: yet Bond is as unequivocally loyal to the British government as they are to him. His philandering is even foiled by the pitying glances of the women who genuinely love him: thus his redemption is available if only he will seize it. Yet Jason Bourne represents a new phenomenon: the mercenary who kills without knowing why, the

servant of the state who despises the state, the man who ultimately believes in nothing.

It is astonishing that in an age when American artistic prowess continually reaches new heights—as is evidenced by the remarkable craftsmanship of *The Bourne Ultimatum*—that directors and filmmakers can produce little that has timeless appeal or that can inspire nobility of mind and deed. The higher we rise, the lower we sink, it seems—that is, until the youth who are tired of this culture of darkness take over the vast wealth and resources at their fingertips in order to crush the Jason Bourne within themselves and create a new, vibrant and redemptive American culture.

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