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Gay BOND-age¹

Clichés are forever?

Evil or psychoanalytically termed the Other has taken many forms in 007 movies over the years. James Bond has fought all kinds of dangers to his super-masculine identity and it seems difficult to think of any stereotype he hasn't stumbled across in the process.

The particular incarnation of evil/Other I want to concern myself with here is homosexuality. Male homosexuality, that is, and the way it is portrayed in one particular Bond movie: *Diamonds Are Forever*². I will briefly point out how this movie is situated in the historical context of an emerging gay liberation movement and the cultural tradition of marking the Other as homosexual. Taking a closer look at the movie itself shall supply us with sufficient material for a psychoanalytically inflected analysis tracing the hetero/homo antithesis³ in the presentation of the two gay characters and Bond's behavior in relation to them.

Finally, I will crawl out on a limb and close my paper with a few deliberations on whether Bond is a closet case and the movie's potential for subversion.

Foreplay: Cruising the context

In the history of the "western" lesbigay movement the years 1969 to 1972 have been described as the time of the most radical political rhetoric.⁴ Not only was violence discussed as a means of politics, the gay liberation movement as one of the 'civil rights movements' of the era claims the notorious "Stonewall riots" in June '69 as its starting point. Whether you agree with this view, or engage in the debate about the "movement" having started in small scale a lot earlier, the fact remains that in 1971 when the Bond movie we're about to discuss was made, gay men and lesbians had started to visibly fight back. So along with practically all

¹ This is a (very) slightly revised version of my talk at the conference.

² GB 1971, directed by Guy Hamilton, starring Sean Connery and Jill St. John

³ Edelman, Lee: *Homographesis: essays in gay literary and cultural theory*, New York: Routledge 1994, 22.

"The misrecognitions through which the hetero/homo antithesis shapes our world require the rigors of a rhetorically sophisticated, psychoanalytically inflected analysis precisely in order to imagine a politics capable of reflecting the complexities of a subject who can only speak from within the coils of those ideological misrecognitions."

⁴ Streitmatter, Rodger: *Unspeakable: the rise of the gay and lesbian press in America*, Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber 1995 (pp. 128-133, 150/51; Stonewall: 120/21)

the other marginalized identities 007 - in accordance with mainstream culture - was continually slapping in the face, these were starting to show some resistance. When thinking about the gay characters' function and presentation in this Bond movie, it would be useful to keep in mind, that none of it was unique. It all fits perfectly into the average depiction of homosexuals as it was summed up in the title of a 1973 essay: "How to be Immoral and Ill, Pathetic and Dangerous, All at the Same Time: Mass Media and Homosexuality"⁵ Homosexuality functioned as the Other, as dangerous, and was thus also used to mark both the Other and the dangerous. Especially in a James Bond context, it is interesting to note that this was true for both parties of the cold war: Communist purity was also threatened by such "perversion" as attributed to the enemy – exemplified for theater audiences in the GDR for instance through "[...] the depiction of the lesbian as a monstrous incarnation of the ideological Other."⁶ in a play by Hedda Zinner.

The movie: You can tell by the smell...

A summary of the confusing plot seems hardly worth the while for my purpose here, so I'll keep it very basic and cut the long story short: Bond, convinced that he has killed his old enemy Blofeld, is sent on a mission to find out to whom and to what end diamonds from British mines in South Africa are smuggled. He takes on the identity of one of the smugglers, Peter Franks, gets to (also biblically) meet this episode's Bond-girl Miss Tiffany Case, finds out that really Blofeld is behind it all and has build a laser canon on a satellite with all the diamonds. This dangerous and powerful satellite destroys a couple of weapons from both parties of the cold war and is being used to blackmail the respective governments. It is controlled from an oil platform where ultimately the showdown takes place and Bond saves the world, or at least Washington, D.C. as that would have been the next target. Not to anybody's surprise, numerous people are killed in the course of the movie, including for example Blofeld's two doppelgaenger. In the very final scene Blofeld's helpers, a gay couple, have followed Bond and Miss Case on their boat cruise, but of course Bond eliminates them just in time for the happy ending.

⁵ Pearce, Frank in: Stanley Cohen and Jack Young (eds.): *The Manufacture of News*, London: 1973, 284-301.

⁶ Sieg, Katrin: "Deviance and Dissidence: Sexual Subjects of the Cold War" in: Case, Brett, and Foster (ed.): *Cruising The Performative*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: 1995 (p. 95); She writes of Hedda Zinner (a GDR playwright): "Eight years later, with the Cold War in full swing, Zinner provided theatre audiences with another example of communist purity threatened by Nazi perversion, this time offering a dramatic analysis of relationships between women. In Ravensbrücker Ballade [The Ballad of Ravensbrück] (1961), the character of Frau Beier, the brutal, lesbian overseer in a Nazi concentration camp for women, exemplifies the depiction of the lesbian as a monstrous incarnation of the ideological Other."

And it is precisely these two, Mr. Kidd and Mr. Wint, I want to take a closer look at. All in all, they appear in eight scenes of the movie. They - as one review on the internet very much in the spirit of the movie put it - “seem to like each other too much.” Their mutual attraction or rather their very close relationship already becomes clear during their first appearance, because of the way they finish each other’s sentences and walk off hand in hand. They speak through their noses, keep on giggling, and Mr. Wint’s lack of masculinity is characterized through his ridiculously exaggerated use of perfume. As Richard Dyer has written about homosexual “types” in cultural representations:

“I have referred to the queen and the dyke types as effeminate and mannish, and much of the force of the image is that gay men and lesbians are, by virtue of their sexuality, in some sense more like the biologically opposite sex. Yet they are not exactly masculine or feminine either. [...] in their use within the dominant culture they are more characteristically portrayed as people who in failing, because of not being heterosexual, to be real women or men, at the same time fail to be truly masculine or feminine in other ways – dykes are unwomanly but fall short of being truly masculine; queens are unmanly and unwomanly. Both are thus often seen as tragic, pathetic, wretched, despicable, comic or ridiculous figures.⁷”

In the fourth scene, Bond and Miss Case are watched by Mr. Kidd from behind a curtain when they are taking their seats on an airplane. Mr. Kidd then sits down next to Mr. Wint and remarks that Miss Case is very attractive for a woman or if one likes women⁸. Of course, this confirms that these two characters are gay. But what is a lot more telling about this incident is what is not said. “Watch the gap” – as the London Underground always reminds us. Picture this: Bond, maleness incarnate, whose appeal to potential sexual partners is consistently presented to be absolutely stunning, is together with a woman watched by somebody whose sexual interests focus on men. And this person doesn’t comment on his attractiveness at all, but on the contrary talks about the woman’s. How can this be explained? Why is this so? I would propose that 007 simply cannot be the OBJECT of another man’s desire nor even of his gaze, because it would harm his status as the ultimate subject, and thus his masculinity. He cannot endure the “fall from master to matter”, in the words of Lee Edelman:

“Male homosexuality in general, though, and its synecdoche, gay male anal sex in particular, [bear the stigma and retain the lure of such an ‘imaginary intersubjectivity’ insofar as they] seem to effect **the subject’s fall from master to matter**: his fall *back*, in other words, from the fantasized achievement of coherence and autonomous agency to a state of mirror-like receptivity that appears, from the vantage point of differentiated self, as inherently ‘self’-negating.⁹”

⁷ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: essays on representations*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1993) 37.

⁸ Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain the original version of the movie, so I had to rely on the dubbed German one. This is obviously a problem when it comes to quotes. I have therefore decided to paraphrase rather than quote, except for one of Bond’s lines later in this paper and later in the movie...

⁹ Edelman, 104-105.

This explanation also works the other way around: Mr. Kidd is too effeminate, too feminized, too much less of a man by way of his sexual orientation as to occupy the subject position that's established by the exclusion of woman as the Other. "Indeed, one might add, only *against* women and gay men may the 'normal male subject' imagine himself *to be a subject* at all."¹⁰ So, as a gay man, he is not a subject, thus he cannot gaze at, cannot objectify Bond.

Coming back to Bond's position, there's another dimension to it. It would put a threat to his pure heterosexuality to be confronted and thus associated with gay desire this directly. One of the golden rules of homophobia resonates in this gap: If you attract homosexuals you might as well be one. Think of the Jerry Springer scandal where a man confessing his love to another on daytime television was murdered by the addressee who couldn't deal with this stain on his straight self-image. Killing his own failure, starting clean. Even though that is not his situation, Bond will have his five minutes of shame –ful gay bashing in the end (we'll get to that incident soon), which provides an interesting example of the power of homophobia.¹¹

Interestingly enough, Kidd and Wint are not the only instances of not quite masculine evil to be found in this particular movie. I would argue that the same mechanism is at work when Blofeld trying to leave a Las Vegas hotel through the casino in disguise, does so in drag. Not only the subordinate bad guys are thus marked gay, big bad boss himself cannot meet 007 on equal ground: Even though quite firmly established (by his derogatory attitude and extremely dominant behavior towards women, e.g. towards Tiffany Case on the oil platform), his masculinity is not as spotless and clean as that of her majesty's agent, who - come rain or shine - is only seen without suit and (bow-) tie on two occasions, namely when he's in bed with a woman and in the bathtub. The fact that Blofeld has generated two doppelgaenger (in a more state of the art terminology you might call them "clones") further contributes to the fragility of his self-identical subject position, and thus of his masculinity. And it does so in two ways: First, reproduction is connoted female, therefore in reproducing himself he's feminized and secondly, the male self-identical subject position as psychoanalysis has theorized it (constituting itself through what has come to be called "Othering") does not allow such a trinity of self, such three identical selves, the autonomous male subject must necessarily be unique.

¹⁰ Edelman, 105.

¹¹ This is not at all to say that I believe in any substantial basis for a „homosexual panic“ argument as an excuse for gay bashers, which would lend itself more easily to the guy from the Springer show than to Bond!

The grand finale of our gay sideshow is somewhat the epilogue of the movie, the very last scene after the showdown on the oil platform. Mr. Kidd and Mr. Wint have followed Bond and Miss Case on their boat cruise. Dressed up as waiters they start serving the happy couple a meal including a bomb hidden in the dessert. Their plan fails, because Bond recognizes Wint's perfume in time, for in his opinion it smells too sweet and too gay. This makes one think of the many attempts to prove some inherent and distinct difference between gay and straight, be it medical, genetic etc. that would finally alienate the Other ideally by some bodily feature (e.g. index finger or sense of hearing!) to a point of no return – or rather of no to and fro. In a nutshell: Super-hero Bond can spot gays by their smell. But not only that, he also outdoes them when it comes to the one and only quality usually attributed to gay clichés come to screen: Sophistication - A refined sense for the totally superfluous luxuries of life. Her majesty's agent knows more about wine than his gay counterpart, of course, and this helps him to prove that his adversaries are no real waiters. Here, gay men don't even qualify as waiters. [-Too bad they don't choose the disguise of hairdressers, it would illustrate my point even better.] With Bond's superiority secured in this respect also, the fighting starts. After Mr. Kidd is eliminated, 007 turns to an in-fight with Wint. His costume as a waiter consists of a tailcoat and Bond pulls the tails between Wint's legs - who squeals seemingly as much in pain as in lust - and ties them to the bomb, before he catapults him overboard to explode before hitting the water. Turning to Miss Case, Bond says: "Den Hund hat's mit eingeklemmtem Schwanz zerrissen!" This is the only occasion where there's an allusion to a man's private parts – repeating the castration verbally since this kind of remark is usually 'for women only' in 007 movies. None of the other bad guys in this movie, or in any other Bond movie I know of, gets castrated and to top it off seems to take some perverse pleasure in that. Through this ultimate humiliation, gays are virtually castrated back into "their" place within the symbolic order:

“for homosexuality registers as a castration that destabilizes the foundational distinction between active and passive, generating the intolerable image of a male body that passively submits to penetration.¹²”

With this exceptional violence ends the movie that paradigmatically embodied by its hero is one huge “virility excess” – if I may borrow Gabriele Dietze's words¹³, alluding to a possible interpretation of its action as a re-action to the formation or beginning visibility of gay liberation.

¹² Edelman, 57.

Is straight (a) drag ?

While the prospect for a subversive reading is very bleak as far as the openly gay villains go, ironically Bond offers some possibilities for a queer outlook. We might view him as overcompensating a secret homosexuality and find his image smiling back at us from Richard Dyer's description of what he calls the Macho-type:

“the gay man is himself identified by his macho look. It is an exaggerated masculinity, and indeed its very exaggeratedness marks it off from the conventional masculine look on which it is based. [...] this gay type retains the idea of (male) homosexuality implying something different in relation to gender, but here there is no notion of a biological in-betweenism but an **excess of masculinity**.¹⁴”

Judith Halberstam makes a somewhat similar case referring to Bond's excessive use of gadgets when she says of her example *Goldeneye*:

”Because masculinity tends to manifest as natural gender itself, the action flick, with its emphases on prosthetic extension, actually undermines the heterosexuality of the hero even as it extends his masculinity.¹⁵”

On the other hand, we might follow a ‘Butleresque’ approach: A hyperbolic performance of “the natural” by way of its exaggeratedness according to Judith Butler is capable of revealing a basically phantasmatic status¹⁶. In other words, rather than giving away 007's homosexuality, this exaggeratedness can ideally help “denaturalize” gender norms. These readings are based on somewhat the same assumption, being that Bond's performance of masculinity puts us in a situation as this:

“The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail [...]”
Otherwise nobody would make out any exaggeration. And this experience of failing usual cultural categories calls into question those very categories otherwise disguised as “natural”.

“When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be “real,” what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. Call it subversive or call it something else.¹⁷”

So, the key question would be whether Bond makes staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, or more simply put: Is the super-macho 007 exaggerated enough? If so, there would be room for arguing a case for Bond's subversive potential, even in the eye of the ‘straightest’ reading. I don't think this is a matter of individual arbitrary preference, but why then is either answer to the ‘subversive or not’ question so unsatisfying? Judith Butler may offer some help here:

¹³ The term is taken from her book: *Hardboiled woman* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt 1997)

¹⁴ Dyer, 40/42.

¹⁵ Judith Halberstam: *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1998) 4.

¹⁶ Judith Butler: *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1991) 215.

¹⁷ Judith Butler: “Preface 1999“ in: *Gender Trouble* (London, New York: Routledge 1999) vii-xxvi: xxii-xxiii.

“I am not interested in delivering judgements on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I believe that such judgements cannot be made out of context, but that they cannot be made in ways that endure through time [...]. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to.¹⁸”

If this leaves room for a conclusion (albeit one that runs the risk of not enduring through time, even though we specify the context), it shall be the following: At least within the context of the last 30 years of mainstream culture, reading *Diamonds are forever* in such a way as to not see it stabilizing but subverting straight, white, male, sexist, racist¹⁹, homophobic rule seems difficult.²⁰ Rather, it is such a reading against the grain which then in turn might more convincingly be labeled subversive. Thus it is no coincidence that the Bond movies themselves have been the target of emancipatory activity, criticism and, of course, playful humor...

...In the late sixties the gay magazine Drum printed a comic strip featuring the hero Harry Chess: “When the gay version of 1960s secret agent James Bond was described as a ‘rugged, virile, sensuous, clever, top agent,’ gay readers knew a *top agent* was the active participant in anal intercourse.²¹”

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¹⁸ Butler Preface xxi.

¹⁹ in one scene an African-American woman turns into a gorilla – need I say more?

²⁰ Scholarly looks at Bond films more recent than *Diamonds are forever*, offered e.g. in this collection and by Judith Halberstam, suggest significant changes with the Zeitgeist.

²¹ Streitmatter, 104.