How to sell a boring action hero

An analysis of the success of *The Bourne Ultimatum* within the context of corporate Hollywood

Abstract

Jason Bourne is certainly not your typical action hero. He may share his initials with that other undercover icon James Bond, but ultimately, they have very little else in common. Jason Bourne is ordinary looking, has no sparkling personality, and no apparent sense of humor. To make things worse, he suffers from amnesia. Initially, all he knows about himself is that he displays impressive situational awareness, has an astonishing set of fighting skills, and that parties unknown want to kill him. Consequently, he looks confused whenever he is not otherwise engaged in dispatching bad guys. Nor is there any eye candy — no beaches and no babes — to make up for his otherwise rather dull personality. Even the final outcome of the Bourne films to date is far from uplifting. Ultimately, Bourne lays bare the moral bankruptcy of the West and its main political and economic systems.

A boring action hero in a politically engaged story? This sounds like a recipe for disaster at the box office and yet the Bourne trilogy is one of the most successful Hollywood franchises in recent years. How did Jason Bourne acquire such a huge audience and critical acclaim? Can a film be both mass entertainment and score high on an artistic scale? How did anti-corporatism and anti-capitalism find its way into mainstream Hollywood? How does all this fit into the marketing strategies of Universal Studios? To summarize: Is there still hope for Hollywood, both aesthetically and ethically?

Introduction

An unconscious man is picked up by a fishing boat, bullet-riddled and without memory. His discovery of a safe-deposit box filled with money, different passports, and a gun raises further disturbing questions about his identity. This is the starting point of the first Bourne film, *The Bourne Identity* (2002, Doug Liman). Its success spawned two more Bourne films, *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004, Paul Greengrass) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007, Paul Greengrass). In *The Bourne Ultimatum*, Jason Bourne is both predator and prey. By now, he has learned that a secret CIA training program made him into the perfect killer, technically superior and morally indifferent. He fully realizes that instead of serving his country, he really was assassinating people who were a threat to the system, that system being the current political and economic power structures. Bourne wants to come to terms with his past, seek forgiveness for his deeds, and ultimately expose his former employees who are now trying to eliminate him.

It is tempting to compare the character of Jason Bourne to James Bond. They have their initials in common and they are both secret agents with superior skills. But that is about as far the shared characteristics go. Compared to Bond, Bourne is a rather boring hero. His fighting skills and his cool-headedness in times of crisis are his only truly impressive assets. Furthermore, he is just another face in the crowd. Unlike Bond, he is no lady's man nor does he have an armada of high-tech gadgets at his disposal. Still, this humble action hero has appealed to audiences worldwide. Even more than *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy*, *The Bourne Ultimatum* was a major hit for Universal Studios. Worldwide, the film grossed US $442,815,128, good for a respectable 82nd place in the all-time box office chart.[1] Still, *The Bourne Ultimatum* is regarded as more than a successful action blockbuster. The film has been praised, not only for its superb chases and perfectly choreographed mayhem, but also for its daring style and its political awareness. The Bourne franchise thus made the transit from mainstream Hollywood product to what the *New York Times* fittingly described as "unusual smart works of industrial entertainment" (Dargis, 2007). In other words: a quality product. Through the analysis of this remarkable trilogy, particularly the

final installment, the present attitude of the big Hollywood studios towards money, art and politics is brought to light.

Art versus business: the Universal case study

In *Hollywood Cinema*, Richard Maltby emphasizes the importance of understanding American cinema as an industry engaged in the production and sale of a commercial commodity. As Maltby defines Hollywood movies, they exist as commercial goods in a capitalist society. Commercial considerations shape their aesthetic organization. From his perspective, Maltby criticizes approaches that see Hollywood as primarily determined by a set of formal characteristics (Maltby, 1995, p. 7). On the other hand, Richard Dyer recognizes the importance of studying cultural, economic, and historical conditions, but he pleads that film studies should not forget that film matters for its artistic merits. Film studies need to return to considering the aesthetic reasons for thinking why film matters, reasons not themselves entirely in concert with the cultures of production and consumption. From Dyer's perspective, film has its own way of doing things that cannot be reduced to ideological formulations or what people (producers, audiences) think and feel about it (Dyer, 1998, pp. 9-10).

It is not just the film theorists, who differ in opinion on how crucial the aesthetic or economic aspects are in the filmmaking process. This conflict between art and business has always been central to American motion pictures, most famously represented by battles between directors and producers. In the history of Hollywood filmmaking, there has been a constant anxiety about the fading quality of Hollywood films due to commercial pressures. This anxiety testifies to the obstinate belief that commercial and artistic aspirations are essentially in conflict. From the studio's viewpoint, the commercial success is of course far more important than any artistic merits. Ultimately, the company executives are not trying to write film history, they are in it for the money.

Concerns about the commercial logic of Hollywood are intensified by the fact that Hollywood is increasingly targeting their product at an audience of teenagers. Since the early 1950s,

Thomas Doherty observes a juvenilization of movie content in response to the new teenage market (Doherty, 1988). This progressive juvenilization of movie audiences has been linked to a further decline in the number of quality films.

The case of Universal Pictures is exemplary for past and current evolutions in the film industry. Like every other major film studio these days, Universal is linked to a larger conglomerate that no longer has filmmaking as its core business. Universal is now part of NBC Universal, a media and entertainment company formed in May 2004 out of the merging of General Electric's NBC with Vivendi's Universal Entertainment. General Electric owns 80 % of NBC Universal with the remaining 20 % owned by Vivendi SA, a French Media Group. The company owns television networks, motion picture companies, and a number of theme parks.[2] Hence, film is one of its many entertainment products.

In the Classical Hollywood past, Universal Pictures made a name for itself with horror classics like *Dracula* (1931, Tod Browning) and *Frankenstein* (1931, James Whale). With yet another monster, Universal Pictures rang the bell for the blockbuster era half a century later. With *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg), studio boss Lev Wasserman helped launch the blockbuster culture that dominates the present movie industry. Despite his initial doubts about *Jaws*, Wasserman knew how to market it. Defying the movie industry's suspicion of television, he saturated the airwaves with advertising. And in place of the traditional model of premiering a movie in New York and Los Angeles, *Jaws* was simultaneously released on screens across the country. Both strategies are now standard. At the time, they were reserved for cheaper and less ambitious films (King, 2002, p. 55). *Jaws* made US $192 million in its first year. According to David Puttnam, Wasserman's entire career was built around an unspoken credo: "The deal, no matter how cynical, is an end in itself." The fact that businessmen like Wasserman were able to take control of the film industry has been an ongoing process since the earliest days. Hollywood had long been ruled by mercurial showmen who operated principally on instinct. Wasserman had their instinct — it was said that he could guess how much a movie would gross just by looking at the first hour's receipts

— but he matched it with a hard-nosed understanding of corporate organization (Puttnam, 1999, pp. 195-196).

These days marketing experts are a significant part of the Hollywood machine. They increasingly dictate what gets made and what gets distributed, as well as what the potential viewing public is told about a film. Hollywood has always been more impressed by box office receipts than art, but over the past decades, films have been increasingly turned into commodities (Dick, 1997, p. 182). Marketing specialists are also running Universal these days. In 2006, Ron Meyer, president of Universal Studios, announced that Marc Shmuger had been named chairman and David Linde co-Chairman of Universal Pictures. Marc Shmuger was the company's former marketing chief. Along with the Bourne franchise, he launched *King Kong* (2005, Peter Jackson), *The Mummy* franchise (1999, 2001, 2008), the *American Pie* franchise (1999, 2001, 2003), *The Fast and the Furious* franchise (2001, 2003, 2006, 2009), the *Bridget Jones* franchise (2001, 2004), and other commercial hits. David Linde's new responsibility was to bring in innovative talent, since he had formerly served as a co-president for Focus Features and president of Rogue Pictures, the specialty film unit of Universal Pictures, since 2002. Linde had overseen a critically-acclaimed slate of films including Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* (2002), Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), Fernando Mereilles's *The Constant Gardner* (2005), and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). He is known to have a nose for talent and breakout box office successes. *Variety* observed that neither chairman had much actual production experience. Still, they oversee all domestic and international business units, including production, distribution, marketing, acquisitions, consumer products, corporate partnerships, strategic planning, and finance (Fleming, 2008).

According to Bernard Dick, corporate Hollywood is even more profit-driven than the Hollywood of the studio years. The days of the studio system may be long gone, but the major studios remain overwhelmingly dominant. They control the international distribution networks. Even so-called independent films are quite often made by production companies that have deals with the major studios for distribution or co-financing (Dick, 1997, p. 171).

The working definition of independent in the US film industry covers all films made by producers who are not members of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and are mostly represented by the American Film Marketing Association (AFMA) (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005, p. 48). Still, 'independent' remains a loose, slippery label. Historically, it has always implied work different from the mainstream, whether this relationship is defined primarily in economic terms or in aesthetic terms. (Hillier, 2001, p. VII). Over the years, Universal has made deals with various independent companies, such as Amblin Entertainment, Morgan Creek Productions, Working Title Films, and StudioCanal. Furthermore, Universal has its own independent sidekick. Independent or art film divisions enable the majors to seek to benefit from the relatively few films of this type that break through to larger success. Moreover, they can be good for the image of the studios. (King, 2002, p. 83). Focus Features is the art house films division of NBC Universal and acts as both a producer and distributor for its own films and a distributor for foreign films. Smaller budget films may come with a larger degree of artistic freedom for independent filmmakers, but their films go down the same distribution road. Corporate executives decide whether or not they get distributed to a worldwide audience.

It is hardly surprising that marketing agents are controlling the film industry today. It is through this vast marketing machinery that films are often turned into hits long before their actual release. Today, films have to score big on their opening weekend in order to be successful. *The Bourne Ultimatum* for instance has a perfectly normal box office history for a successful hit today. It made approximately 69 million dollar on its opening weekend, which is 30.5% of the total domestic gross. Because of this typical box office pattern, the importance of test screenings can not be underestimated. They are a strong indication of future success. Executives may decide that films that perform poorly in test screening are condemned to go straight to DVD. The theatrical box office is no longer the only place to make money. There is significant income to be made from the DVD and television market. The first Bourne film was in fact a greater DVD success than a box office hit. Whereas Bond films are famous for their extensive product placement, the Bourne films exercise considerably more restraint in this

area. Still, it is hardly a coincidence that the character played by Clive Owen in *The Bourne Identity* drives a BMW, just as he does in the BMW commercials.

The constant takeovers, the truly massive expenditures on marketing, the recent strikes, the fire at Universal Studios may suggest a crumbling Hollywood industry. However, even in times of financial crisis, there seems to be no need for concern. Geoff King quite correctly observes that even the most notorious box office disappointments are not always the financial disasters they might first appear (King, 2002, p. 53). The major studios only take calculated risks. Filmmaking is simply following a corporate ethos that its principal task is to make profits for shareholders. A movie that fails to make a considerable profit at the box office often quite undeservedly gets labeled a flop, even if no money is in fact lost at the end of the corporate line. According to the impressive amount of statistical data gathered in *Global Hollywood 2*, there are no signs that Hollywood is weakened despite the growing competition of other entertainment media, such as the booming video game industry. Furthermore, Hollywood has tightened its grip on international movie business. The world market is crucial to Hollywood. In the past decade, the overseas box office has grown to the point where it virtually equals the domestic figures (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005, p. 10). *The Bourne Ultimatum* made 48.6% of its total gross outside the US.[3] Measured in box office receipts, Europe is Hollywood's most valuable territory (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, p. 17). More difficult to answer is whether Hollywood truly fulfils a need with its worldwide audiences or whether it operates via monopolistic business practices. Furthermore, are these ever more cynical bottom-line driven practices slowly suffocating creative forces in Hollywood? Some even question whether today's global Hollywood is still able to deliver that unique mix of art and entertainment.

From action blockbuster to quality film: the Bourne case study

The Bourne Ultimatum is an action-adventure film, designed to entertain large audiences. Hollywood has always relied strongly on genres to categorize, economize, and promote its products. According to Steve Neale, action-adventure films have been a dominant trend since

the 1980s in Hollywood, exemplified by the *Alien* films (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), the *Indiana Jones* films (1981, 1984, 1989, 2008), The *Rambo* films (1982, 1985, 1988, 2008), the *Die Hard* films (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007), and the *Terminator* films (1984, 1991, 2003, 2009). This trend encompasses a range of films and genres, from science fiction to thrillers and war films. The term action-adventure refers to a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases, and explosions, and in addition to special effects, an emphasis on athletic feats and stunts (Neale, 2000, p. 52). This set of characteristics certainly applies to *The Bourne Ultimatum*. The film is structured around three thrilling chases, each of which pits the extensive, elaborate high-tech eyes and ears of the CIA against the intuitive, ultra-alert mind of a single man with impressive fighting skills (Lee, 2007). *The Bourne Ultimatum* is no small action flick, but a downright blockbuster. Blockbusters are supposed to attract a huge audience and a lot of money is spent to make this happen. *The Bourne Ultimatum* was made on a budget of US $110,000,000 which is a normal budget for a big studio film. For a large-scale action-adventure film, *The Bourne Ultimatum* holds back on spectacular explosions and state-of-the-art special effects. But then again, no costs were spared to deliver exhilarating fights and stunning chases. For instance the production devoted six weeks to the climactic car chase in lower Manhattan, a location that certainly doesn't come cheap. The oversized blockbuster budgets not only enable a higher production value, but also the contribution of star actors. In this case, Matt Damon was cast as Jason Bourne. Matt Damon was already a star, but he was not an obvious choice to play an action hero. Damon is no typical glamour boy, nor is he a muscleman like Schwarzenegger or Stallone. He comes across cautious, quiet, and even vulnerable. Still, the Bourne films made him an action star. Damon succeeded in getting the audience to accept that Jason Bourne was unbeatable and helpless at the same time. Apart from the characterization of Jason Bourne, *The Bourne Ultimatum* also has a rather smart story compared to the average action-adventure blockbuster. Despite the simple pitch of an amnesiac hit man, the story has a complexity rarely encountered in such films. In an action film, the thrill of the action is more important than the logic of the story and the credibility of the characters, as it is clearly

the case in *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007, Gore Verbinski) and *Transformers* (2007, Michael Bay), two major blockbusters released in the same year as the last Bourne film. *The Bourne Ultimatum* aspires to be more than a thrilling rollercoaster ride. The smart conspiracy plot guides the kinetic energy of spectacular chases and brutal fight scenes. A lot of screen time goes to the character and story building, both in between action scenes and across the total length of the film. Director Paul Greengrass's goal was to hit that "sweet spot between energy and information" (Greengrass, 2007). He wanted his film at times to be pure energy, but he wanted to keep the audience informed about where the story was taking Jason Bourne and why. Therefore, the cause-and-effect chain that is central to Hollywood storytelling is never broken. Whether you regard this narrative structure as a heritage from Classical Hollywood story crafting or not, Greengrass does not refer to Hollywood's distant past. He marks the conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s, such as *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), *The Parallax View* (1974, Alan J. Pakula), and *All the President's Men* (1976, Alan J. Pakula) as main points of reference (Greengrass, 2007). The so-called New Hollywood of the 1970s not only saw the rise of the blockbuster, it was an era of unrivalled creative energy. Today's leading directors such as Paul Greengrass are children of the seventies.

It is primarily the name of British director Paul Greengrass that lends *The Bourne Ultimatum* a quality label. His name is associated with a kinetic style and a history of engaged filmmaking. The old prejudice still lingers that genre films — and certainly action-adventure films — are foremost mass products following a fixed set of rules whereas the link with a talented director holds the promise of an original, outstanding work of art.[4] Hollywood executives predominantly tend to use star actors to sell a film. They will, when the occasion merits, employ the same strategy with star directors. Studios use the name of a well-known or critically acclaimed director as a marketing instrument (Elsaesser, 2000, p. 238). However, Universal took a chance in putting Paul Greengrass in the director's chair. He was a critically acclaimed, but not a well-known director on the domestic American box office. So far, Greengrass has adjusted well to the Hollywood system. Today, it is virtually impossible

for a director to have total control over a big budget film. Greengrass has to play by the studio rules, but he has been able to simultaneously put his mark on a film. He is interested in real-life stories and he makes *The Bourne Ultimatum* look like one, fusing the traditional look of a Hollywood action blockbuster with his own typical vérité style.

Greengrass does not hold a sole claim on the current use of a vérité style. Worldwide, filmmakers use a spontaneous, documentary style to give their picture a sense of reality. The handheld aesthetic is well represented in Hollywood these days. The success of reality TV, news shows, and Youtube has made executives realize more than ever that reality sells. Audiences are believed to respond well to authenticity and a sense of realness. Therefore, the Hollywood style is being injected with a new realism that most critics like to refer to as a vérité style. The term vérité is borrowed from the Cinema Vérité, a French documentary movement of the 1960s (Hayward, 2000, p. 58). Today, the term vérité style covers a variety of semi-documentary styles that often make use of handheld cameras, rough editing, actual locations, and non-star actors. In the case of *The Bourne Ultimatum*, it is difficult to untangle the typical stylistic ingredients of the action-adventure film, the Greengrass film, and the vérité trend. Many of the stylistic techniques used in *The Bourne Ultimatum* can be labeled vérité, but it is important to realize that this vérité look results from deliberate choices and not from random recording. First, there is the extensive search for the ultimate location. The action scenes are set against the everyday streets of major world cities like Paris, London, Madrid, Tangiers, and finally, New York. The film deliberately does not show off tourist spots, but tries to capture a sense of everyday city life. Furthermore, the restless camera suggests that scenes are directly and spontaneously recorded, when in fact camera positions and movements have all been very precisely planned. The editing also looks edgy, frenetic, and impulsive, yet remains tightly controlled. Ultimately, the vérité style leaves the viewer with the impression that they are watching a poignant news story or at least a story that matters.

Vérité is considered to be more than a handheld aesthetic. As were their forerunners of the French Cinema Vérité, today's vérité filmmakers are presumed to address political and social

issues. The Bourne films keep this promise. Not only is *The Bourne Ultimatum* trying to set itself apart from other action-adventure films with its much praised talented director, unusual action hero, and daring film style, there is also the socially critical undertone. *The Bourne Ultimatum* is more than a handsome thriller; it speaks of the dangers of military indoctrination, global capitalism, and American imperialism.

Ethics as a selling strategy

James Bond is not the obedient spy, who simply takes orders. However, he seldom questions the nature or the purpose of his assignments. Ultimately, he is loyal to his employees and their main objectives. Jason Bourne is not. The Bourne films tell a spy story with a distinctive anti-authoritarian tone.[5] Paul Greengrass added his semi-documentary style to make an urgent and realistic picture about a hypocritical US government and its equally hypocritical war on terror. Greengrass has covered this issue before in *United 93* (2006). In between *The Bourne Supremacy* and *The Bourne Ultimatum*, he directed this real time account of what is presumed to have happened aboard Flight 93, the fourth hijacked plane that crashed in Pennsylvania on 9/11. The film ends with the image of the passengers striking back and storming the cabin, a moment that for Greengrass symbolically marks the beginning of America's war on terror.[6] In the Bourne films, Greengrass shows how the imperialist strategies of the American government undermine the moral values of its main institutions and affect the lives of its citizens. Jason Bourne himself is the proof of what military propaganda and indoctrination can do. From a broader perspective, the film portrays a morally bankrupt West.

However, despite this critical undertone, the CIA isn't challenged as an institution. A few malicious individuals are held responsible, not the system that shaped their behavior. In 1979, Fredric Jameson pointed to this trait in Hollywood narratives, when talking about the ideological function of the Mafia narrative. Jameson claims that the downfall of the Mafiosi in the first two *Godfather* films (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974) had to obscure the inherent injustice of the capitalist, economic system (Jameson, 1979, p. 42)

> The function of the Mafia narrative is indeed to encourage the conviction that the deterioration of the daily life in the United States today is an ethical rather than economic matter, connected, not with profit, but rather "merely" with dishonesty, and with some omnipresent moral corruption whose ultimate mythic source lies in the pure Evil of the Mafiosi themselves (Jameson, 1979, p. 43).

Jameson's position is relevant to the Bourne films. Once again, authority is questioned, but the problem lies with the disturbed morals of a few CIA supervisors and not with the system. Ultimately, the situation is resolved by their downfall. Still, it can be argued that through their downfall, the faults of the system have at least been exposed. Since the 1960s, Hollywood's representation of politics has reinforced the disillusionment of its audiences with the political process. Furthermore, to personalize fundamental societal problems is not necessary a strategy to successfully obscure them. Hollywood's engagement with societal problems is most often indirect. Issues of class, nationality, and sexuality are more likely to be embodied in characters and action than to be expressed as themes (Maltby, 2003, p. 306). Another feature of Hollywood cinema that provoked Jameson's criticism is the need for closure. Once the personal problem is resolved, the societal issues are overcome, at least for a while. To Jameson, Hollywood films thus suggest that society only needs its citizens to be at their best moral behavior and that no major political, social, or economic upheaval is necessary. The solution to all problems is not changing the core of the system, but of enhancing incorruptibility, honesty, crime fighting, and finally law-and-order itself (Jameson, 1979, p. 43). In his analysis of the Mafia narrative, Jameson thus considers the Hollywood method of storytelling to be an ideological enterprise. Jameson's critical approach to Hollywood is inspired by the strong condemnation of Hollywood films by the *Frankfurter Schule* in the 1930s and 1940s. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer heavily criticize the ideological manipulation and the commercial logic of the Hollywood studios.

> That the difference between the Chrysler range and General Motors products is basically illusory strikes every child with a keen interest in varieties. What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and range of choice. The same applies to the Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwin Mayer productions. But even the differences between the more expensive and the cheaper models put out by the same firm steadily diminish: for automobiles, there are such differences as the number of cylinders, cubic capacity, details of

> patented gadgets; and for films there are the number of stars, the extravagant use of technology, labor, and equipment and the introduction of the latest psychological formulas (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977 [1944], pp. 123-124).

Today, the premise that pure art can only be contaminated by commercial interest is still fashionable. Bill Nichols describes this kind of attitude towards Hollywood as an elitist, aesthetic fetishism. He claims that the more a thing is valued as art, the less it is acknowledged as a commodity. Moreover, he insists that the more we value a film aesthetically, the less we concern ourselves with is ideological operations (Nichols, 2000, p. 45). In other words, Hollywood is often discredited because of its popularity and its commercial goals. Mainstream Hollywood films like the Bourne films are suspect, both aesthetically and ethically.

On the opposite side, cultural studies tend to value Hollywood films because of that same popularity. They especially take an interest in Hollywood's large audiences. Stuart Hall, among others, turned his attention to the audience and the fact that the societal issues films raise spur different reactions with different viewers (Hall, 1980 [1973]: pp. 125-127). In the case of *The Bourne Ultimatum*, some viewers may focus on the happy end and evil being overcome. Others may take away the message that the CIA can't be trusted and some simply return home thrilled by the entertainment provided by vicariously participating in the action. However, David Morley — once a pioneer to the active audience perspective with his book *The Nationwide Audience* — warns not to underestimate the power of large media institutions. For Morley, the power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to reconstruct the films which the viewer then interprets (Morley, 1997, p. 125).

Douglas Kellner also tries to reconcile the active audience perspective and the lingering ideas of the *Frankfurter Schule*. In his view, it was a mistake of the *Frankfurter Schule* to assume that audiences were cultural dupes who were simply manipulated by media culture. But it is equally questionable to assume that audiences are always active and creative in producing their own meanings (Kellner, 1997, p. 116). In other words, *The Bourne Ultimatum* needs to be analyzed as a media product manufactured by the Universal Studios. Its meaning is not

entirely up to the viewer. On the other hand, the commercial aspirations of Universal do not control the entire filmmaking process. Or better yet, that the entertainment industry that is Hollywood, still leaves room for aesthetic and ethical heterogeneity.

In the end, Hollywood films do not necessarily deliver a consistent ideological message, however formulaic they may seemingly appear to be. Simultaneously establishing, challenging, and negotiating the morals of American society has always been central to Hollywood narratives. According to Kellner, Hollywood genre films in particular tend to support dominant American values and institutions, but they are also used to contest ideological norms as well as reproduce them, and to provide ideological critique as well as legitimization (Kellner, 2000, p. 131). *The Bourne Ultimatum* does end with the downfall of the corrupt CIA supervisors, but other questions remain. For instance, can Jason Bourne be redeemed for killing a Russian diplomat and his wife who stood up against the oil Mafia? Can he be held personally responsible for his deeds or is it all the fault of the CIA?

No matter what message ultimately comes across, the fact is that major studios like Universal do not shy away from a politically engaged plot that is critical of the American government and its institutions. Nor does Hollywood automatically rule out talented directors or stars that have a history of political filmmaking. Greengrass has a history as a politically engaged director. Matt Damon also has an image of political awareness.[7] The crucial fracture in the corporate strategy is that each film must be sold as its own mini-brand. The stars, name recognition of the director, the special effects, and the quality of the story sell the film. This means that socially engaged filmmakers can win themselves a degree of directorial control, if they can convince someone in the corporate-run process that their idea will sell. Ben Dickenson has already observed how important the independent label has become to Hollywood's market manipulation (Dickenson, 2006, pp. 163-164). This openness towards independent filmmaking in Hollywood does not necessarily indicate that the gap between mainstream and independent American cinema is closing. Mainstream Hollywood films are still associated with large budgets, mass entertainment, and conservative ideology, whereas independent films are perceived to be low-budget art house cinema with progressive agendas.

Despite these enduring differences, the two circuits are interconnected, both financially and artistically. The major studios distribute independent films and independent directors take on mainstream films. *The Bourne Ultimatum* gets its independent tag by bringing on board a director like Greengrass with a clear political engagement and an avant-garde style. The commercial success of *The Bourne Ultimatum* may further encourage studio executives that this formula works. But then again, a few flops in the near future could well convince them otherwise.

Conclusion

Through the years, Hollywood's core business has remained the same: to entertain its audiences and make large profits. Not surprisingly, Hollywood does not want to damage the profitability of its products with undue controversy. To call the pitch of *The Bourne Ultimatum* subversive would be farfetched. The Bourne films deliver trendy statements against global corporatism and American imperialism similar to those often encountered in Hollywood films since the 1960s. These films may raise awareness, but are hardly political manifestoes. Yet, in a time where Hollywood is said to produce ever louder, bigger, and dumbed-down spectacles, these smart industrial products represent a hope for its ethical and aesthetic future.

More than any other mass entertainment industry, Hollywood has repeatedly proven that art and business can go hand in hand. In the 1950s, the film critics of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* heralded Hollywood as a place of true art by respectable authors. Today, the seventies are applauded as a time of creative energy by the current generation of filmmakers. At the same time the seventies gave birth to the blockbuster, that phenomenon which approaches film more than ever before as a commercial product. *The Bourne Ultimatum* is a true child of the seventies, both an artistic highflier created by a talented director and profitable entertainment manufactured by a major studio. It is a commodity and it has artistic value. In the forthcoming years, Hollywood executives will hopefully realize that investing in talent does pay off. This strategy can help Hollywood regain an adult audience and thus re-establish

its position as an industry that delivers quality entertainment for the worldwide audience. With *The Bourne Ultimatum*, Universal has hit the sweet spot between art, business, and entertainment.

References

Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1997 [1944]). Dialectic of Enlightenment (J. Cumming, Trans.). London: Verso.

Box Office Database. *The Bourne Ultimatum*. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.boxoffice.com/movies/?id=bourneultimatum.htm

Dargis, M. (2007, August 3) Still Searching? But With Darker Eyes. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/08/03/movies/03bour.html

Dick, B. F. (1997) *City of Dreams: The Making and Remaking of Universal Pictures*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky.

Dickenson, B. (2006). *Hollywood's New Radicalism. War, Globalisation and the Movies from Reagan to George W. Bush*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris.

Doherty, T. (1988). *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Boston (Mass.): Unwin Hyman.

Dyer, R. (1998). Introduction to film studies. In J. Hill & P. Church Gibson, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (pp. 3-10). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elsaesser, T. (2000). De filmregisseur als auteur. Kunstenaar, keurmerk of ingenieur? In T. Elsaesser (Ed.), *Hollywood op straat. Film en televisie in de hedendaagse mediacultuur* (pp. 223-238). Amsterdam: Vossiuspers AUP.

Fleming, M. (2008, February 20) Universal's re-born identity. *Variety*. Retrieved June 10, 2008 from http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_story&articleid=VR1117981337&categoryid=2520

Greengrass, P. (2007) Director's Comments. In Crowley, P., & Marshall, F. (Producers), & Greengrass, P. (Director). (2007) *The Bourne Ultimatum* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Studios.

Hall, S., Hobson, D., Lowe, A., & Willis, P. (Eds.). (1980 [1973]). *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1977*. London: Hutchinson.

Hayward, S. (2000). Key Concepts in Cinema Studies. London: Routledge.

Hillier, J. (Ed.). (2001). *American Independent Cinema. A Sight and Sound Reader*. London: BFI Publishing.

Jameson, F. (1977). Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture. Reprinted in F. Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (1992, pp. 11-46). London, New York: Routledge.

Kellner, D. (1997). Overcoming the Divide: Cultural Studies and Political Economy. In M. Ferguson & P. Golding (Eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question* (pp. 102-120). London: Sage Publications.

Kellner, D. (2000). Hollywood Film and Society. In J. Hill & P. C. Gibson (Eds.), *American Cinema and Hollywood. Critical Approaches* (pp. 128-138). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

King, G. (2002). *New Hollywood Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lee, N. (2007, July 24) A Star is Bourne (Again). *Village Voice*. Retrieved from http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-07-24/film/a-star-is-bourne-again

Maltby, R. (2003). *Hollywood Cinema*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.

Miller, T., Govil, N., McMurria, J., Maxwell, R., & Wang, T. (2005) *Global Hollywood 2*. London: BFI.

Morley, D. (1997). Theoretical Orthodoxies: Textualism, Constructivism and the 'New Ethnography' in Cultural Studies. In M. Ferguson & P. Golding (Eds.), *Cultural Studies in Question* (pp. 121-137). London: Sage Publications.

Neale, S. (2000). *Genre and Hollywood*. London, New York: Routledge.

Nichols, B. (2000). Film Theory and the Revolt Against Master Narratives. In C. Gledhill & L. Williams (Eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies* (pp. 34-52). London: Arnold.

Official NBC Universal site. *Company Overview*. Retrieved September 6, 2008 from http://www.nbcuni.com/About_NBC_Universal/Company_Overview/

Puttnam, D. (1999). *Movies and Money*. New York: Vintage Books.

Sarris, A. (1992). Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962. In G. Mast & M. Cohen & L. Buardy (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism. Introductory Readings* (pp. 585-588). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Notes

[1] All box office numbers concerning *The Bourne Ultimatum* can be retrieved from the Mojo Box Office Database.
[2] More information about the different areas of NBC Universal can be found on its official homepage: www.nbcuni.com
[3] *The Bourne Ultimatum* made US $227,471,070 domestic and US $215,346,089 foreign, totalizing US$442,817,159.
[4] In the 1950s, the French auteur theory already hailed the director as the artistic genius behind the Hollywood film. Through the writings of Andrew Sarris, the auteur theory became highly influential in the US in the 1960s (Sarris, 1992, pp. 586-587).
[5] The Bourne films are loosely based on the novels by Robert Ludlum. They have been updated from their original Cold War setting and further developed by screenwriter Tony Gilroy.
[6] Greengrass intended to conclude the film with the sober statement that 'America's war on terror had begun'. Eventually Paramount opted for the less political and more sentimental 'Dedicated to the memory of all those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001'.
[7] In his breakthrough film *Good Will Hunting* (1997) which he co-wrote with Ben Affleck, his character challenges Robin Williams' character to read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. Williams then responds by challenging him to read Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*. In recent years, Matt Damon acted in *Syriana* (2005, Stephen Gaghan) and *The Good Shepherd* (2006, Robert De Niro), both films that also criticize the CIA and the general objectives of US foreign policy.