

The Bourne Ultimatum—Action-packed, and it pays the price

By David Walsh
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The Bourne Ultimatum, directed by Paul Greengrass, screenplay by Tony Gilroy, Scott Z. Burns and George Nolfi, based on the novel by Robert Ludlum

The Bourne Ultimatum, directed by Paul Greengrass (*Bloody Sunday*, *United 93*) is a fast-paced action film. In this, the third part of a series (following *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy*—the latter also directed by Greengrass), disaffected CIA assassin Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) attempts to discover how he was transformed into a killing machine and by whom. Those in the intelligence agency responsible for Bourne's training, which was part of a larger secret program, attempt with equal vigor to eliminate him before he uncovers the truth.

The film covers extensive and often appealing ground in Turin, London, Paris, Tangiers, Madrid and New York, among other locales. There are many action sequences in *The Bourne Ultimatum*, including several lengthy pursuits by vehicle and on foot, numerous fights, exploding cars, break-ins and so forth. Additionally, the film devotes a good deal of attention to the CIA's chilling surveillance techniques, including the ability to listen in on and trace virtually any phone call at any moment anywhere in the world.

The precision and energy with which the action scenes are filmed and organized is pleasing, up to a point. There is a certain satisfaction in seeing any technical task performed efficiently, and even elegantly. And some of this works effectively on the nerve-endings.

However, unless the spectator is prepared to relinquish his or her ability to reflect on things almost entirely for two hours or so, Greengrass's film does not stand up to close scrutiny.

This is hardly a secret: almost any work that insists on "non-stop," relentlessly "breathhtaking" action does so because it has relatively little of interest to say when it slows down. Usually, the ceaseless motion substitutes for

engaging *genuinely* dynamic manner with a life obscures a drama that is essentially *static*. This kind of art is a form of violent moving in place.

So, in the case of *The Bourne Ultimatum*, the swiftness of the proceedings comes at a high price. To the extent that the filmmakers permit themselves to settle for that, they sacrifice the possibility of relating a story with any enduring impact. That is their artistic choice.

And audiences too, who have little choice in the matter, are also obliged to make a sacrifice. It's always possible to surrender to rapidly moving images, this is something easy for anyone to do and even comforting, it's not a crime either...but, in the end, it's a very limited and limiting activity.

Audiences and critics, perhaps especially critics, so easily impressed!, may convince themselves that cleverly engineered work like Greengrass's film represents a transformation of quantity into quality, that the sheer force of the images must add up to "something."

A lack of artistic commitment, however, can come in many different forms, including energetic ones. In *United 93*, about one of the passenger planes hijacked on September 11, 2001, Greengrass avoided making the difficult choices and, despite a conscientious effort to present an accurate picture of the events, produced a film whose openness to interpretation, as the WSWS commented, was "not a strength." The so-called "neutral gaze" should never be confused with a genuinely objective or penetrating view.

Unhappily, the director, whose specialty seems to be impersonality, may be all too well suited for the *Bourne* series, devoted to a central figure suffering, literally, from "loss of personality." The film ends at the point when the protagonist apparently regains his identity. A small consolation for the spectator who has to leave the theater at that promising moment. Greengrass seems to have been too easily tempted to try and reproduce, in the quality and

feeling of his film, Bourne's stony, empty look and mechanical motions.

The stoniness and cold efficiency of every single action, look, utterance and gesture in the film become wearing, as do the endless chase sequences, and even unintentionally comical. Does any character in this film ever drop a fork, or forget an address or trip over his or her shoelaces? Only the unfortunate *Guardian* journalist, into whose lap the CIA secrets first land, stumbles and fumbles nervously, and his almost instantaneous reward is death. The lesson is clear, for character and filmmaker alike: no false moves! But a work without any "false moves" is work without any genuine movement at all.

Again, when the action slows down, one becomes more aware of the essential poverty of the creation. The dialogue is terribly clichéd. CIA officials say things like "Give me eyeballs on the street" and "Sit down, strap in and turn on everything you've got," and little else.

Objects—cameras, listening devices, computers, cell phones, automobiles, trains, etc.—are given vitality in the film, but life is largely drained from the people. Their relations are empty and machine-like. (Of course *The Bourne Ultimatum* is hardly unique in this regard.) Matt Damon may be a hard-working though limited performer, but Julia Stiles and Joan Allen and David Strathairn have given complicated performances before. They are given relatively little to do here.

All this wasn't necessary. One could have made something more interesting out of this material. And, occasionally, Greengrass does. The interplay between the trained assassins at the end of the film is promising: each, supposedly an unfeeling monster, begins to question what has been done to him. The mention of "rendition" and "enhanced interrogation," including the hideous practice of water-boarding, and the visual references to Abu Ghraib, with its hooded detainees, are valuable.

The Bourne Ultimatum seems to take for granted, more or less, that the CIA is an all-powerful gang engaged in the business of spying on and murdering, if necessary, people it doesn't like.

The politics of the piece are liberal and limited: the CIA's secret assassination program, although perhaps motivated by a sincere desire to deal with terrorism, is wrongheaded and dangerous. Elements within the agency, who "didn't sign up for this," battle with the more ruthless types and win the day, ultimately testifying about the covert program before a congressional committee.

This is something of a fantasy. Senators and members of Congress know a great deal about the CIA's

murderous global operations and approve of them on a regular basis. More than that, the film's premise—that a group of the agency's top officials will go to any lengths to preserve the secrecy of their assassination program and their own skins—seems out of date, almost quaint.

Certainly, there are serious concerns within the intelligence apparatus about the legal and professional consequences of their activities becoming known. They take pains to cover their tracks. However, at a time when leading US government officials and "opposition" politicians—in fact, the entire American political and media establishment—insist quite openly on the need to "kill" or "take out" political opponents all the over the world, the filmmakers are surely lagging far behind. Assassination and torture have become official or quasi-official US *policy*. Bourne's "shattering" discoveries would barely make the evening news.

Instinctively grasping this perhaps, the filmmakers are all the more inclined to pile on the action. Still, it's not so much the limited politics per se as the uncommitted and unrealistic approach to life and art that weakens the film so dramatically. If the writers and directors had tossed out half the chase sequences, two thirds of the surveillance scenes, three quarters of the spy jargon (which is only meant to impress) and simply thought for a moment about contemporary human reality and its consequences, including the consequences for those in the intelligence field and their victims, *The Bourne Ultimatum* might have been something different. But we are not yet at a point when many filmmakers are willing to go out on a limb like that.

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