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THE BOURNE TRAGEDY: LOST SUBJECTS OF THE BIOCONVERGENT AGE

DEBBIE EPSTEIN & DEBORAH LYNN STEINBERG

*Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent*

—T.S. Eliot (1925)

Introduction

Jason Bourne, the protagonist of the *Bourne* trilogy of films released between 2002 and 2007, embodies the equivocal characteristics of a postmodern, disenchanted and melancholic age. He is in some ways a classic tragic hero, here at the mercy of clandestine governmentality, surveillant geopolitics, and the encroaching sweep of technology—the late modern variant of the Fates and Gods. And he is fatally flawed in the manner of the Shakespearean tragic hero whose anguished dilemma is set in motion by his own character and actions. As we show in this paper, Bourne’s tragedy is, at least in part, his embodiment of these irreconcilable subject positions, which also constitute a tragic dilemma of the bioconvergent age.

In this paper, we examine the *Bourne* trilogy to explore three themes. First, we consider the imagined and actual interfaces of bioconvergence—of body, gadgetry, and electronic communications. We explore the ways in which the bioconvergent tendencies represented in and by *Bourne* reflect and cultivate a cultural unconscious deeply seduced by and imbricated in surveillant governmentality. Second, we consider the ways in which the trilogy achieves its effects through the deployment of both hyperrealism and verisimilitude. In this context, we explore the filmic interpellation of audiences into a fantasy of

omnipotence and omni-science, on the one hand, and the underlying phantasy¹ of a zero-sum world that uncouples morality from affect, on the other. Thus, we consider the ways in which *Bourne* articulates two interlinked phenomena—a distinctively American romance with the sociopathic/heroic subject and a paranoid, dystopic world that is and seems seductively real. Our third theme is the *Bourne* journey through an obsessional spiral of paranoia, action and reaction. Here we explore the trilogy as a social description of the expulsive and retentive tendencies of the bioconvergent age, where the demand for instantaneity drives out all other considerations (morality, reason, connection) and where the lost subject, in his interminable quest for himself, remains lost.

In the next section we outline our particular approach to media analysis, which draws on social semiotics, cultural theory, and cultural psychoanalysis. Moving into the main body of our argument, we begin with a brief consideration of the key theme of this special issue—bioconvergence and what we describe in this paper as the bioconvergent age. We then turn to a close reading of the trilogy. We consider the *automatonic* character of Bourne as a site of power and loss. We then move to the themes of iteration and perseverance. Here we interrogate the narrative arc of the *Bourne* saga in which he always ends where he began and must begin again. Thus, the *Bourne* journey is a melancholic, perpetual re-enactment of trauma. We argue that the trilogy provides a touchstone for a melancholic cultural unconscious. We then explore the question of paranoia and the affective and epistemic dimensions of paranoid governmentality and instantaneity, with their telescoping of time and imperative. We conclude the paper by returning to our title, *The Bourne Tragedy*, to bring our argument together in a consideration of bioconvergence's seductions and its lost subjects and subjectivities.

Specularity, Social Signification, and the Cultural Unconscious

In her early work, Laura Mulvey (1975) argued that film provides a potent window on the patriarchal unconscious of a culture. Our longer-term project has been to build on this proposition, both by broadening the political considerations that fill out a “cultural unconscious” and by unpacking a wider array of component characteristics that underpin the relationship between media representations and their immediate cultural moments. What we are developing

¹ In this paper we use both spellings of f/phantasy. Where we begin the word with ‘f’ we are referring to the more commonsense meanings of the term as something imagined, a story. “Phantasy,” in the psychoanalytic sense, refers to the underlying, unconscious investment in a surface fantasy. See, for example, Juliet Mitchell’s (1986) explanation.

further through this analysis of the *Bourne* films is a version of social semiotics that draws on particular strands of cultural and psychoanalytic theory.

First, we are interested in what we have termed elsewhere “the materiality of signification” (Epstein and Steinberg 2007: 4)—that is, the way that signification materializes and is materialized by historically located, embodied, and agentic practices as well as representational conventions of genre, trope, and text. A dimension of this is what Steinberg, elsewhere, has termed “filling-in”:

“Filling-in” ... along with spectacle, plays a part in forging what might be termed the *affective-epistemic contract* between film and film-viewer. To a significant degree, cinematic signification deals in narrative and semiotic *fragments* which are then *filled in* by the viewer.... [T]he more recognizable the fragment (the more commonsense it is), the more easily the audience can *fill in* the rest. (Steinberg 2009: 5; original emphasis)

This tells us something of the ways in which audiences invest affectively in particular moments or modes of representation and also something of the preferred knowledges and affectivities accruing to what might be termed the *interpretive contract* between text and audience. Thus, what audiences *fill in* occupies a terrain of (yearned for) familiarity, constituted both by knowledge and desire. In *Bourne*, these are explicit themes: these are films *about* filling-in. Indeed, there is a verisimilitude in the labours of Bourne as protagonist that mirrors the work of audienceship; both are bound in a compact born of spectacular loss, the seductions of technology, and the tensions and apprehensions of a totalizing political power. Consequently, we are able to find in the *Bourne* trilogy an insight into both the commonsense purchase, and the intimate effects, of paranoid governmentality.

Our second interest is in the operations of biopower and the bioconvergent body-ethic. In this context we draw on and interrogate a number of cultural theoretical perspectives concerned with governmentality (Nadesan 2008; Rose 1999 [2nd edition]), the production of post-cyborg subjectivities (Haraway 1991), and the iterative, embodied dimensions of the political realm (Butler 1993, 2009). These critical tools allow us to interrogate the films’ depiction of the interface of bodies, technology, and representation—and what this means for subjectivity.

Psychoanalytic theory provides our final critical resource. In this context, we wish to develop Mulvey’s understanding of the culturally sedimented character of spectacle and scopophilic desire. Our use of the notion

of a “cultural unconscious” thus also draws on and departs significantly from Jung’s (1991) structuralist notion of the collective unconscious, that is, the symbolic/archetypal imaginary distinctive of the human species that organizes and makes sense of human experience. The notion of a *cultural* unconscious posits a collective imaginary (operating at both conscious and intrapsychic levels) that is constituted through and subject to cultural practice, social relations, and representation.

The *Bourne* films offer an intimate portrait of the intrapsychic as well as social/representational subject position. We argue that Jason Bourne stands in for the troubled subject of a wider culture and a wider cultural moment. For this reason, a psychoanalytic reading of the character of Bourne and of the signification regimes of the films offers us the opportunity to explore two further aspects of the bioconvergent age: the role of narcissism in the neoliberal era and the place of mourning and not mourning² —melancholia—in the political realm.

There are, of course, frictions among the frameworks we bring together here. On the one hand, we have a set of concepts drawn, in the main, from Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis (phantasy, melancholia, fetish, repetition compulsion, and so forth), and on the other, a set drawn from positions that either reject psychoanalysis (e.g., Foucauldian governmentality theory) or have an ambivalent relationship to it (e.g., Butler). Bringing these resources together thus introduces some tensions. For example, a Kleinian account of unconscious phantasy implies a different kind of subject from the one envisaged by Foucault or Butler, who conceptualize personhood in different ways. We suggest that these tensions are productive, allowing us to understand subjectivity, social relations, and signification from distinct and unusual vantage points. Thus, for example, they allow us to consider more fully the affective constitution of the social as well as the representational realm, and to map, and thus more persuasively explain, the intrapsychic purchase of particular governmentalities and biopolitical genealogies.³

A Bioconvergent Age

One of the underpinning assumptions of this special issue is that we are living in, or moving towards, a bioconvergent age. There are a number of distinctive

² The question of *not mourning* as a political as well as an intimate, intersubjective affect is discussed in Johnson (1999).

³ We would like to thank Peter Redman for his comments, which have helped us think particularly about this section of the paper.

trajectories of social, technological, and political transformations that could be said to constitute this age⁴ and that are captured in the visual and narrative arcs of the *Bourne* trilogy, our central case study.

Film itself, for example, is and has been from its inception, a bioconvergent medium. It is constituted by technical, organizational, and artistic infrastructures and institutions that bring together, *inter alia*, bodies, technology, markets, and representation. Within the medium of film, the political thriller as a genre has characteristically articulated dystopic social commentary with complex technologies and extraordinary feats of stunt work. These have frequently been deployed both as tropes of visual content and as film production method. Furthermore, the genre's realist conceits have historically been achieved in part through the integration of live action with ordinary life.

Digitalization has taken this consolidation to the next level. If we compare two similar scenes, one from *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock 1959), the other from *Bourne Ultimatum*, we can trace the intensifying bioconvergent capacities of the film industry. In *North by Northwest*, secret service agents pursue Cary Grant's character through New York's teeming Grand Central Station. This is a location shot given its aura of immediacy and claustrophobic realism by the use of the handheld camera and the integration of the main action into the normal melee of station life. In *Ultimatum*, Jason Bourne and the journalist he is meeting are pursued through Waterloo Station in London, not only by agents, but also remotely through CCTV surveillance cameras positioned throughout the cavernous building. One of the extra features on the *Ultimatum* DVD minutely traces the making of this scene. We are told that the surveillance cameras are not merely a plot device but are, in fact, the surveillance system of the actual station. The filmmakers got permission to use the CCTV system to produce visual sequences for the movie, which was at this point in the plot about the power of surveillance *per se*. Thus, even while the fantasy of pursuit by embodied human agents remains fictional in both films, the fantasy of total surveillance by remote technology in *Ultimatum* is entirely real. If the claustrophobia of an earlier age concerned clandestine intrusions into intimate space, by the time of *Bourne* the agency of this effect is distributed,

⁴ We are not suggesting that bioconvergent trajectories are uniform in their distribution or totalizing in their praxes or effects. Bioconvergence is complexly subject to and in some respects has been unpredictably subversive or transformative of geopolitical inequalities, modes of governance, and political economy, as well as of modes of kinship and communication, interpersonal attachments, identity practices.

without the necessity of immediate presence and arguably all the stronger for that.

Thus, a second trajectory of convergence is technology qua technology through the medium of digitality. We are living in a time of ever more complex and telescoped integrations of machines and systems (audio, visual, informatic, biotechnical) disseminated and consumed as the gadgetry of everyday life. Integrated technology has become a globalized locus of recognition, expectation, and commonsense, even in contexts where relatively few can avail themselves of it. It is a growing means and medium of globalization, effecting and reorganizing identifications, intersubjective relations, social movements, and the political landscape itself.⁵ Furthermore, technological integration is both the means for creating spectacle and is, in itself, spectacular in ways that rearticulate the field of scopophilic (and indeed audiophilic) desire and pleasure. The progressive integration of technology has heralded a transforming ecology of fetishized consumption, production, and capital. This process is graphically rendered in *Bourne*. The instruments of technological convergence (the computer, the cell phone, global positioning systems, even the old-fashioned fax that appears to redeem the CIA in *Ultimatum*) appear “democratized” as the fetish objects of both pursuers and pursued, “assets” and “targets,” agents and incidental passers-by.

The third trajectory is the imbrication of these technological tendencies in government and governmentality. This has particular salience on the terrain of institutions dealing in and deploying political paranoia. From the Cold War to the “war on terror,” from CCTV surveillance to biometric border controls, bioconvergent technology has transformed the panoptical and “thanatopolitical” (Murray 2006) potentialities of government as well as its more mundane disciplinary and regulative capacities.

This leads us to the fourth trajectory of bioconvergence, the interpellation of the human subject into the convergent bio-ethic, with distinct imperatives of action, affect, and agency. It provides a reinvented trope of the weaponized human subject bent on saving (or destroying) himself and the world. Therein, as we shall see, lies the ambivalent object lesson of Jason Bourne.

⁵ The *Arab Spring* of 2011, for example, relied on the use of digital communication through the technologies of social media.

The *Bourne* Phenomenon

The *Bourne* films are loosely based on the political thrillers of Robert Ludlum.⁶ While the novels are all set in the latter stages of the Cold War, the films track from the Cold War sensibility of *The Bourne Identity* (2002) to the post-9/11 sensibility of *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007). The films star Matt Damon as Jason Bourne and include major actors: Albert Finney (Albert Hirsch), David Strathairn (Noah Vosen), and Joan Allen (Pamela Landy), as well as the less well-known Julia Stiles (Nicky Parsons) and well-known German actress, Franka Potente (Marie Helena Kreutz). The *Bourne* trilogy has been a particularly successful and profitable⁷ enterprise. *Supremacy* and *Ultimatum* have, between them, won a number of awards.⁸ All three films are frequently replayed⁹ on terrestrial and cable television.

The central plot conceit is that Jason Bourne has traumatic amnesia. The trilogy begins with the potent imagery of a man, unconscious and adrift in a rough sea, his body, we later discover, is riddled with bullets. He is picked up by an Italian fishing boat and revived, upon which he is immediately thrust into the primary motif of all three films—his unremitting, hypervigilant search for his “real” identity.

The films track three key plot trajectories. The first concerns Jason Bourne and our (his) emerging knowledge of himself. While he cannot remember anything about his previous life, we (and he) discover that he has embodied knowledges, reflexes, and abilities that verge on the superhuman. He has virtually no self-knowledge and yet is omniscient; he is sympathetic and yet will switch instantaneously into a mode of extreme and effective violence; he is one man cast adrift, and yet a prime mover within a maelstrom of corruption, international intrigue, and conflict. Finally, he is dissociated, yet anchored to reality not simply by the very real danger to which he is constantly subjected, but through his accidental meeting, in *Identity*, and growing relationship with Marie, his helpmeet and internalized good object. It is this relationship—even after she is killed at the beginning of *Supremacy*—that hauntologically¹⁰

⁶ The trilogy comprises *The Bourne Identity* (1980), *The Bourne Supremacy* (1986), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (1990).

⁷ According to Wikipedia the films’ profits have, so far, tripled the cost of making them.

⁸ Both films won best picture at the Empire Awards and *Ultimatum* won three Academy Awards, including for best editing.

⁹ During the writing of this paper, one or another of the *Bourne* films were screened on Canadian cable stations with notable regularity.

¹⁰ The concept of “hauntology” comes from Derrida (1994).

signifies the possibility of redemption, both of Bourne and, symbolically, of the world.

The second plot trajectory concerns the world order surrounding Jason Bourne, which is in the decompensating throes of late capitalism and neoconservative governmentality. Bourne's is the drama of the singular, alienated, (un)common man in a struggle against a totalizing (if not totalitarian) state and, simultaneously, a parable about the seductive unreason of political as well as personal paranoia.

The third is a projection of visual spectacle and time. The scene constantly and instantaneously shifts between world cities: London, Paris, Zurich, Madrid, Marrakesh, New York. True to the contemporary mode of the political thriller, the films are in virtually constant motion cutting from car chases to crashes to fight sequences. This is particularly the case in *Ultimatum*. Even in moments of pause, there is the sense of menace, anxiety, and a gathering storm. These slower-paced scenes are disturbed by Bourne's visible hypervigilance, the pulse rate of the accompanying music, and the generic expectation of fast, "unexpected" action. Moreover, the span of the three films tracks the progressive integration, consolidation, and convergence of complex technologies and communication systems. Indeed, the films portray visually and through their plot the development and ubiquitous sedimentation of digital communication and smart technology. We witness the bulky, inelegant, flickering computer terminals of *Identity* resolve into flat screen aesthetics and the Motorola RZR cell phone, the primary and ubiquitous fetish object of *Ultimatum*. There is, thus, a powerfully evocative verisimilitude between the evolving capacities of surveillance and information gathering and their portrayals. In earlier action films, such as the James Bond series,¹¹ hyperbolic gadgetry was presented with irony and humour; in *Bourne*, the technology is dystopically "real."

Automatonics

"You're a malfunctioning \$30,000,000
weapon." (Ted Conklin, Head of
Treadstone, *The Bourne Identity* 2000)

In 1960, Clynes and Kline (1960) introduced the notion of the cyborg, which, in an optimistic, modernist reading, they understood as machine enhanced humanity. As an integration of machine and man (*sic*), the cyborg, from this

¹¹ The DVD cover for *Ultimatum* has the strap line, "Move over 007, Bourne is back."

standpoint, represented the augmentation of embodied reach, power, and capacity. This idealized version of the cyborg differs somewhat from the ways in which the cyborg has been taken up in popular culture. Here, typically, the cyborg's enhancement heralds a particular kind of dilemma as superlative power threatens to uncouple subjective personhood from its intersubjective and intrapsychic moorings. The cyborg dilemma is of the human being whose hybridization with technology threatens the loss of (usually) his humanity. Significantly, the dilemma does not go the other way. The machine typically does not mourn its loss as it is humanized.¹² *Star Trek TNG*'s character Data, the Terminator, Yod in Marge Piercy's novel *He, She and It* (1993)¹³ are all framed in this anthropomorphic, anthropophilic mode of yearning. The cyborg imperative, in some renditions, may be to annihilate humanity, but its underlying impetus is almost invariably to find its humanity or to rescue the humanity of others. The cyborg, in this context, is an outlying figure of self-mourning; its tragedy lies in its inability to become fully human and its ultimately irresistible drive to sacrifice itself in order to save humanity.¹⁴

In her landmark essay, Donna Haraway (1991) argued that in late modernity we are all cyborgs as the interface with technology is ubiquitous and virtually inescapable. Moreover, the cyborg for Haraway is an altogether more contrary and ironic kind of outlier—one that does not mourn its humanity, but revels in and is self-aware of its potentiality to disrupt the dominant order. Haraway's cyborg is the illegitimate child of the patriarchal, imperialist institutions that produced it. For Haraway, the cyborg is able to overturn the

¹² An interesting exception is the character of Seven of Nine from *Star Trek Voyager*, whose subversive (and seductive) ambivalence is her continuing attachment to the imperialist Borg who took her captive, as formerly human, and assimilated her capacities to their own. Seven of Nine is visually presented as a classic cyborg—an enhanced articulation of machine and human. While the crew who rescue her attempt to restore her to human, they find that she cannot survive without a measure of her cyborg circuitry. Thus Seven of Nine is (and can be) only partially returned to humanity. However, her yearning, insofar as she has the capacity to feel it, is not entirely human and not, as with the earlier character Data, abject. Self-possessed and self-aware, she is drawn to, and mourns in, both directions. It is never clear what counts, for her, as her true home (as Borg or as human) as she rides, in some measure a captive herself, on the lost *Voyager*'s unremitting journey back to earth.

¹³ In the UK, this novel has the title *Body of Glass*.

¹⁴ A related dilemma also emerges in this frame of cyborg representation, which is the contestation between the humanized and dehumanized cyborg. In the *Terminator* films, for example, there is a population of outlier cyborgs, an army gone rogue. In this frame, the cyborg has malfunctioned. It is redeemed by the recuperation of its purpose (to serve and save humans) by one of its own number. What is disturbing, then, about the machine-human hybrid is its latent tendency, always threatening even at its most docile, to displace its subordination to and sublimation of human will, including where that will is to kill other humans.

dominant, thus resolving the dilemma of the *human* outlier (in particular, the gendered outlier).¹⁵ She writes:

Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (p. 182)

Jason Bourne can be read as embodying the characteristics of both of these versions of the cyborg. He is superlatively enhanced. He is multiglossic—speaking every language he encounters indistinguishably from a native speaker. His physical prowess in combat, whether in the use of weaponry or hand to hand, is accelerated, indefatigable, and undefeatable. While not knowing himself, he is at the same time omniscient, always knowing the ways in and out, the hiding places, the labyrinthine articulations of every building in every city. Functionally, he is a global positioning unit, a central intelligence, a distributed agent. He is also rogue. He exists in an anomic limbo, yearning towards yet dis-integrated from his full humanity. At the same time, he is anarchic, a rogue agent born of and from a corrupt agency. Thus, he also bespeaks Haraway’s “powerful infidel heteroglossia.”

Yet Jason Bourne is also not a cyborg. Both his amnesia and hypermenesia are artefacts of an automatized (and atomized) humanity that does not graphically articulate body and machine. His bodily prowess is all flesh, conditioned. Like the other assassins of the CIA’s Treadstone project, Bourne is everywhere and nowhere, an unmoored being, an (un)free agent. Treadstone assassins are not assimilated; they are used, reduced, evacuated subjects, sleeper cells waiting for technologized activation, external to themselves, of their purpose.

This is not precisely a cyborg fantasy; it is instead a bioconvergent fantasy, an edifying and dystopic tale of what happens to human beings when they are captured, activated, and transformed in the network of technology but are not themselves hybrids of machine and body—notwithstanding that psyche

¹⁵ Ripley, in *Aliens 2*, is Haraway’s cyborg. In the final conflagration of the movie, as she integrates herself into the machine to fight the alien, it is a triumphal moment of revelry, superhumanity, and, significantly, the reversal of the gender order.

and soma are mechanized, technologized, and mediatized. If the classic cyborg fantasy only goes one way—the yearning towards humanness—the bioconvergent fantasy goes both ways—towards and away from humanness—as the drama takes place almost entirely on the terrain of the human. Bourne’s is not the cyborg’s but the automaton’s dilemma.

In the *Bourne* trilogy, the Treadstone assassins are referred to as “assets.”¹⁶ What makes them assets is their capacity to be animated via technology in an instant, given a mission to kill their “target(s)” and then return to their previous, quiescent state without qualm, hesitation or morality. They are willingly and wilfully automaton, their agency confined to the method of murder, their reflexes instantaneously lethal and their bodies hardened. Indeed, they are without affect¹⁷ and without pain.

The automaton’s dilemma is, in part, that of the weaponized human, yearning towards his superordinacy as much as defeated or disorientated by it; and yearning at the same time towards his humanity as much as wanting to repudiate the equivocal nature of being. This phantasy of omnipotence is that the expansive character of humanity and the repudiative character of automatonicity can be reconciled in the same body and person.

Iterations

Perseveration: [pur’səvərə’shən]

Etymology: L, *persevero*, to persist ...

[T]he involuntary and pathologic persistence of the same verbal response or motor activity regardless of the stimulus or its duration.

(*Mosby’s Medical Dictionary*, 2009)

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler (1993) sets out her theory of performativity and iterative effects. Focusing on what she terms the “heterosexual matrix,” she makes a twofold argument. The first is that gender and sex are not separate, but are the linked products of discourse.¹⁸ That is, gender is not a cultural artefact

¹⁶ The use of the term “assets” for operatives of this nature is not limited to the *Bourne* trilogy, but is characteristic of the wider spy/thriller genre.

¹⁷ Most of the “assets” are also solitary. Only two appear “in the world” (one with a child and the other in a board meeting). The others appear only alone, either waiting in an anonymous hotel room, with few possessions and no other interests, for a call to action, or in the midst of action.

¹⁸ This was Butler’s central argument in the earlier book *Gender Trouble* (1990).

imposed on the biologically sexed body. Rather, sex and gender emerge inseparably from discursive practices (bodies of knowledge, operations of power and regimes of truth).¹⁹ Second, she argues that gender/sex become embodied and materialized through the reiteration of performative practices.²⁰ In this way, Butler retheorized our understanding of the relationship not only between gender, sex, and the body, but also between representation and materiality.

The *Bourne* films are iterative in a number of different ways. First, reiteration is the central motif of the series. Visually, this is played out in constant and nearly identical fight scenes; chases (on foot, by car, by moped); tropes of global positioning (interchangeable aerial shots of world cities); instantaneous transfers of activating information (by cell phone, terminal to terminal, via CCTV); opulent cosmopolitan settings (hotels, banks, the beautiful streets of Paris, London, New York). In narrative terms, Bourne's quest for the truth of himself is a constant repetition of events or movements, only slightly varied in each instance. Similarly, his CIA antagonists obsessively replay the same scenario in which they attempt to have him killed, only to have this foiled. Repeated too are scenes of drowning/rebirth that begin and end each film.

A notable and particularly revealing mirror scenario occurs first in *Identity* where Bourne is seen helping Marie dye and cut her hair to assist her in evading his CIA antagonists who are now after her too. It is this scene which binds Bourne to the world as he is bound to Marie—as equal, as capable of love, his humanity restored in his distance from the assassins' hypermasculine, automatic second nature. In *Ultimatum* this scene is replayed almost exactly with Nicky, the weak, minor agent in the CIA who was charged with tracking Bourne but instead helps him escape. However, here, Nicky is shown dying and cutting her own hair as Bourne sits deliberately away from her, examining his

¹⁹ Foucault's concept of "discourse" (1977) is particularly useful in linking these two aspects of human life. Discourses provide us with "regimes of truth" that define what is, or is not, thinkable or do-able in any particular context—though discourses are never totalizing and always contextual. What this means is that, as Dimen (2011) puts it:

Discursive formations ... are power structures. They are networks of socially located ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and action patterns that systematically fashion and inform subjectivity and its practices. (Dimen 2011: 5, qtd. in Epstein 2011)

²⁰ It is not that we *are* men and women, but that we become ourselves as men and women as we continually *perform* man and *perform* woman. In other words, gender is both culturally and individually realized through repeated gendered performance.

damaged hands. This scene too tells us of Bourne's outlier masculinity, this time in his restraint and his refusal of eroticized voyeurism.²¹

Iterative fetishes also punctuate the trilogy. There are the wads of cash, the multiple passports, the hidden guns. There is the ubiquitous digital and communications technology, with particular reference to multiple screens and the cell phone. Indeed, by *Ultimatum* the cell phone functions as a virtual protagonist in its own right, moving the plot—but more than that, rendered as a displacing focal object and object of desire, infiltrating the body-affective gestures of all the characters and dominating virtually every scene. Finally there is the fetishistic preoccupation with the childlike face and flamboyant hair of Nicky and the hair and body of the character of Pamela Landy (Bourne's almost-ally in the CIA). This hair, face, and body fetish is a primary site of gendered voyeurism in the Mulveyan (1975) sense; it is the quintessential male gaze. In Nicky's case, the camera's constant fixation on her face and hair visually undermines her credibility as a CIA agent, let alone one in charge of monitoring and stabilizing the psychological state of the Treadstone assassins, as she is identified in *Identity*. Her hair constantly compromises security; it is the visual trope of imminent and immanent next-victimhood. For example, in *Ultimatum*, in a protracted chase scene through the streets and alleyways of Marrakesh, her hair stands out as a beacon, calling on the assassin, Desh, and allowing him to track her intimately. But for the fetishization of her hair, it would be inexplicable that as she runs through a bazaar full of stalls and women with scarves, she does not grab one to tie around her head. In *Identity*, by contrast, before the hair-dyeing scene, Bourne asks Marie if she has a scarf, to which she replies, "to hide my hair." That Nicky is still alive and free at the end of *Ultimatum* is thus a twist on what we would generically expect. Indeed, this is one of the signals that this story has not ended; the logic of voyeurism demands an altogether different fate for her.

With Pamela Landy, the visual play of the camera on her face and the elegant lines of her body work against her position as a major player in the CIA. It is a key mode through which she is generically set up as an abject-object: ineffectual, weak, being played, primed for sacrifice. This camera gaze parallels and stands in for the gaze of the other (all male) CIA agents, who plan for Landy to take the fall for the Treadstone conspiracy. It is also what breaks the affective contract with the audience that would otherwise be positioned to understand Landy not merely as a parallel protagonist (she is the character who

²¹ With the character of Nicky, any eroticism on Bourne's part could only have been voyeuristic and objectifying because distinct from his relationship to Marie, he has no attachment to Nicky and Nicky could not be his equal.

redeems and figures out the mystery of Bourne at the end of *Ultimatum*) but the heroic protagonist.

Perhaps the most powerful and iconic of the iterative fetishes of *Bourne* are the meticulously choreographed hand-to-hand fight scenes. These scenes recur continually in a clash and blur of bodies in motion, rendered, particularly in *Ultimatum*, with hyper-speed intercut editing and jarring sound effects. In each such scene, Bourne's antagonist is another Treadstone assassin. Each is a mirror of himself and of the other—equally militarily primed, equally hardened, equally impervious to fear or pain, equally flat in affect, equally omniscient. This is a hyper-masculinity of a particular sort. It is pathologically iterative, born of compulsion. It perseverates. In visual terms, these scenes rehearse a fetish of lethal imperative and automaton affect. The ideal Treadstone agent inhabits an eroticized, antagonistic, and agonistic intensity and yet also an absence, an evacuation.

Freud (2006 [1914]) argued that “repetition compulsion” is the attempt to repair trauma:

The forgetting of impressions, scenes, experiences comes down in most cases to a process of “shutting out” such things ... we may say that the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it. (pp. 392-394)

This describes the *Bourne* journey. And yet, the iterations do not repair, and indeed cannot repair. This is signalled pointedly at the end of *Ultimatum* when Bourne is confronted by his choice as David Webb to become Jason Bourne and his adamant repudiation of that fact. He says, “I remember. I remember everything. *I'm no longer Jason Bourne*” (emphasis added). This refusal means that he can neither integrate nor mourn, and thus his journey is ultimately melancholic. He must begin again.

Paranoid/Schizoid Governmentality

“It changes things, that knowledge, doesn't it?” (Bourne in *Supremacy*)

Foucault's (1980; 2008) concept of governmentality refers to the normative exercise and deployment of biopower (the exercise of power over bodies and populations) through government and techniques of control; the processes that

produce normative political values, institutions, practices, and subjects; the production of ideal citizens; technologies of the self (the modes through which people enfold themselves in and inhabit particular discourses and regimes of truth); and the notion that power is capillary.²² Nikolas Rose (1999 [2nd edition]) extends this notion to the governance of the soul—what Mitchell Dean (1999) called “governmentality.”

The power described through the concept of governmentality is minutely explored in the *Bourne* films. First, there is the interplay of central, distributed, and remote agency, with the CIA on the one hand and its dispersed “assets” on the other, all bound in an infiltrating network of electronic communications. Defining all of these are the operations of capillary power. In human *qua* human terms, there is a contract of governmentality here that produces a circuit of moral displacement. The CIA trains and deploys its “assets” not only to carry out missions but also to bear the primary moral responsibility for them. In turn, Treadstone agents suborn themselves to the ethos of the organization, which “frees” them to kill. Thus, the Agency is not responsible because the agents act “autonomously”; and the agents themselves are not responsible because they are carrying out centrally ordered missions. Both “assets” and the CIA move as ostensibly unrestricted agents and yet epitomize un-freedom. This is explicit in the interchange between Ted Conklin and Jason Bourne when they meet at the end of *Identity*:

Bourne: You sent me to kill Wombosi ...

Conklin: ... I sent you to be invisible. I sent you because you don't exist....

Bourne: I don't remember what happened in Marseilles.... I don't re—

Conklin: You brought John Michael Kane to life. You put together a meeting with Wombosi. You found the security company. You broke into the office. You're the one who picked the yacht as the strike point. You picked the boat. You picked the day. You tracked the crew, the food, the fuel. You told us where. You told us when. You hid out on that boat five days. You were in, Jason. You were in.

The contract of displacement is further dispersed in the operations of informatics. Information flows in logics and circuits unsutured from their

²² Power, in Foucault's understanding, is not monolithic, but rather is everywhere and flows in all directions.

origins and contexts. At the same time, this dispersed power consolidates and converges back to the centre. There is a conceit that even the most minute unit of information can be gathered, made sense of, and mastered. Thus, capillary power is not just in its dispersal but also in its congealing and in the centrifocal collision of bodies, data, and technology. In this context, remoteness is the privileged affect; an effect but also constituting the feedback loop of remote control and remote agency. This is reiterated in the visual trope of the “remote control” mobilization of “assets” as they move from quiescent waiting (embodied “sleeper cells”), to activation to their missions.

Second, the films are visually and narratively composed of myriad signifiers of paranoid surveillance. There are intertextual referents to the “war on terror” that lend verisimilitude to the narration of the making of Bourne—graphic scenes of water-boarding and other torture, of indiscriminate murder, of hooded prisoners, verbal references to rendition, the evocative panoply of Cold War and post-Cold War imagery. There is a sense of enormity and globality on the one hand and intimate (but “justified”) intrusion on the other. Thus we move from globe-hopping vistas to the ubiquitous wire-tapping of phones, to the cameras that perpetually watch all locations (the street outside the Zurich bank in *Identity*, where Bourne meets Marie for the first time; the offices of *The Guardian* newspaper in *Ultimatum*; the CCTV system at Waterloo Station, also in *Ultimatum*). Agents break into private homes, cars and offices, secret files are stolen and read, diaries and notebooks are combed. The CIA headquarters is a teeming hive of panopticism. Even Bourne covertly watches Pam Landy in her own office. Surveillance, and the anxiety that both produces and is produced by it, is thus an absolute and totalizing imperative.

Third, all of the action takes place through the compaction and telescoping of time. This is partly an artefact of cinematic convention (quick-cut editing, for example) and partly of the cinematic treatment of narrative sequence. In the editing of the fight scenes there is a jerking of time that evokes a sense of vertigo. Fragmented flashbacks also create a sense of destabilization. There is a compression of time with technology, as information is instantaneously and continuously transmitted. This temporal seamlessness is, at times, jarringly juxtaposed with old-fashioned realist time—Bourne eating breakfast with Marie at her ex-boyfriend’s house, dyeing her hair, even the on-foot rush to get to her car (*Identity*). The telescoping of time also produces a sense of globality and the imminence and immanence of catastrophe. The demand for instantaneity is perhaps the most forceful effect, symptom and source of paranoid governmentality. The films depict how the projection of danger produces the need for *now*. In turn, the need for *now* leads inexorably to violence, excess, and an unmooring of reason.

The character of Noah Vosen (the CIA agent in charge of “cleaning up” the Treadstone failure) embodies the escalating stakes inherent in the paranoid standpoint. The key early sequence in *Ultimatum* traces, through Vosen, the escalating frustration that moves from a demand to know now²³ to a demand and an entitlement to kill. When *Guardian* journalist, Ross, uses the word “Blackbriar” on the phone (which, along with all other phones worldwide, is being monitored) Vosen and his team at the CIA are instantly alerted. Vosen escalates rapidly from seeing Ross as an object of suspicion, to naming him a “target,” to ordering his assassination. This is a protracted scene of paranoid decompensation. Everything that Vosen does not know about Ross—why Ross gets up from his desk, where he is going in Waterloo Station, who he is talking to on an untapped and unknown cell phone—further unhinges him. Vosen’s activation of the “asset” to kill Ross demonstrates the catastrophic grandiosity that is produced by the conjunction of global power and personal paranoia. The totalizing tendencies of this conjunction are emblemized in Ross’s complete lack of suspicion, despite chasing a story of covert government corruption, that simply saying one word on a private cell phone is enough to get him killed.

Thus, in the *Bourne* saga, we see the move from paranoid governmentality to its logical corollary—the chaotic and schizoid spiral unto death. Threat is not simply a sensibility but an active, insistent objective. It is constantly present. It is driven. It is pursued. Paranoid governmentality in the late modern context carries not only a conceit of omniscience, but also one that is vastly leveraged by the capacities of technology. This governmentality moreover is defined by prerogative—the entitlement to judge and to act in haste. It carries a conceit of justification and an affect of accumulation. Its mode, ultimately, is escalation to self-destruction. As Landy protests to Vosen (who, in another such heat of the moment has ordered the killing of Nicky):

Landy: She’s one of our own. You start down this path ... where does it end?! (*Ultimatum*)

Noah Vosen represents only one of the characters in *Bourne* on a sociopathic spectrum; indeed, sociopathy is the primary character drive of all three films. The trilogy is populated by three competing sociopathic subjectivities. First is what might be termed the *weak-evil* character styles of the progenitors and leaders of Treadstone: the originator of the programme, Ward Abbott (Brian Cox) who is a “Mengele” figure. He designed, presided over, and rationalized

²³ *Vosen*: I want all his [Ross, the *Guardian* journalist’s] phones, his Blackberry, his apartment, his car, bank accounts, credit cards, travel patterns.... I want to know what he’s going to think before he does. Every dirty little secret he has. And most of all, we want the name and real time location his source.

Treadstone. He is corrupt, weak of body, avaricious, and slothful. As such he is both antagonist and generically set up to be “justifiably” killed, though in this instance he kills himself so that he does not have to face up to his moral responsibilities. His last words before shooting himself are “I am a patriot,” which in the dystopic logic of the film, is a both a confession and denial of governmental corruption and criminality.

A counterpoint within “evil sociopathy” is Albert Hirsch (Albert Finny). Hirsch is not personally weak, but is an organizationally subordinated character; he does not run Treadstone, but he trains their agents. Within the Oedipal drama of Bourne, he is positioned as the bad father. In the logic of the plot, Hirsch also serves the function of the Greek chorus, telling us of Bourne’s inner turmoil as he comes to himself. He tells Bourne (and us): “You’re eventually going to have to face the fact that you chose to be Jason Bourne, right here” (*Ultimatum*). Finally there are the operational leaders of Treadstone, most fully developed in the character of Noah Vosen (David Strathairne). Vosen is ruthless, but also weak. He is rash and not sufficiently clever, yet has an unjustified regard for himself. He is not slothful like Abbot, but totally dependent on technology and gadgets to compensate for his inability to master and control. His is the epitome of grandiose narcissism. And like Hirsch, he is generically set up for comeuppance.

A second characterization of sociopathy is *automatic*. The Treadstone agents, who are evacuated of will and personality, embody this form of sociopathy. They are not weak; they are expendable. They cause, they are, and they stand in for the taken-for-granted, as well as scopophilically pleasurable and necessary, collateral damage. Automatic sociopathy is, more generally, a quintessential convention of the *Bourne* variant of the thriller genre. In this convention, audiences are interpellated into an automatic visual experience and an automatic ethos. Such films are peppered with sequences in which violence is graphically rendered and yet distinguished by the camera *not* lingering on the aftermath of or on effects on bystanders. Thus a *Guardian* journalist (Ross) can be assassinated in a public place with the aftermath to bystanders and to the social community of Ross (himself a bystander) left entirely unexplored. The victims of the spectacularly violent and protracted car chase (and crash) sequences remain off camera. Collateral damage in this scopophilic logic constitutes a demand and, simultaneously, a denial. Such scopophilic pleasures are intensified by the generic demand that certain characters are and *must* be victims. Weakness or lack (whether that lack is within a character we know, or our lack of knowledge about the character—e.g., the dead extra) presage not only victimization, but its rationale and

rationalization. In Butler's terms, these characters are expendable, "faceless," not grievable. Indeed, theirs is a *demand* for death (1994; 2009).

Finally, in Jason Bourne, we have the trope of *romantic* sociopathy. This is constituted as a conceit of reconciliation between the possession of automatic power and the capacity for empathetic attachment. The romantic sociopath has its antecedents across genres from the Western, to science fiction to the thriller. It is the quintessentially American "one man" generic hero. The romantic sociopath promises the (wished for) resolution of the automaton's dilemma—not only that the dehumanized subject can maintain his humanity, but that his humanity is (can be) enhanced by inhumanity.

Bourne's de-suture from his automatic subject position (he is the preeminent Treadstone assassin) is presented as his primal trauma. It is the moment, told in fragmented, disorienting flashback, where he cannot fulfil his mission; he cannot shoot Wombosi because two children are present. In psychoanalytic terms, a primal trauma can be understood as an originary event (abuse, violence, neglect) that radically threatens personhood. In *Bourne*, the automaton's primal trauma is that humanity threatens automatic subjecthood. Thus, Bourne's trauma arises from a sudden infiltration of empathy, of recognition of the humanity of the other. He is suddenly brought to awareness, unable to shoot a man in front of his children, unable to maintain his possession of himself. Thus, Bourne's is a trauma of his second nature. He was not born an assassin, but made. His particular brand of militarized automatonism can only be a socialized nature—hence the scenes of torture and dehumanization, also conveyed in flashback, which tell us of the character of training necessary to create the weaponized human.

Underscoring these competing sociopathic characterizations, and of the sociopathic standpoint of the *Bourne* films, are fantasies of omnipotence—of omniscience (omni-science), of control, of narcissistic self-justification. Their global, technological setting and intrigue driven plot trajectory privilege a larger cultural aesthetic organized around governmentality and taken to its logical extremes by paranoia. What distinguishes Bourne as a romantic hero, in this context, is his apparent break with the hypermasculine aesthetic and dehumanizing ethos of this world.²⁴ What distinguishes him as a heroic sociopath is the romanticized denial of his investment in being Jason Bourne.

²⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to more fully interrogate the *Bourne* films as a gendered field. However it is worth noting that the only developed characters who are not sociopathic are female. Pamela Landy and Marie Kreutz both in their own ways represent reparation for Bourne himself and a route to reparative governance. The far less developed character of Nicky, too, is not sociopathic, notwithstanding her location and responsibilities, like Landy, in the CIA. She

The *Bourne* Tragedy

The semiotic economies of the *Bourne* trilogy suggest powerfully the phantasmatic underpinnings and seductions of bioconvergence and bioconvergent governmentality. In this context, convergence works at a number of levels. Perhaps most important is verisimilitude. The films depict a totalizing digital revolution: an escalating integration, *inter alia*, of communications technology, global positioning, algorithmic data processing, the Internet, and digital surveillance. Furthermore, their central plot conceits are located at the interstices of digitality, machine, and body. This portrayal is, of course, not a fantasy; these convergences are taking place (and indeed, literally made possible the making of the movies). At the same time—and in so doing—the *Bourne* films sequence a shift, both generically and phantasmatically, in the biopower imaginary. The setting of the *Bourne* drama on the terrain of covert politics and governmentality leverages both the persuasion and the seductions of capillary power. *Bourne* spectacularizes capillary power's convergent as well as dispersive tendencies. Here, metaphors of capital (economic, social, cultural, and technological) fill in a place of affective investment. Governmentality puts capital in place, holds it in place, and also destroys it—assets are simultaneously disposable and perpetual.

The *Bourne* trilogy, furthermore, provides a window on the imperatives of action, agency, and affect that are emergent in this bioconvergent age. The iterative motifs of the trilogy reflect and cultivate a larger cultural conviction of the inevitability of convergent biotechnology. The films bespeak a bioconvergent bio-ethic, located within but not entirely congruent with Nadeson's description of neoliberal governmentality:

[Neoliberal g]overnmentality ... explores how individuals are privileged as autonomous self-regulating agents or are marginalized, disciplined or subordinated as invisible or dangerous. (Nadesan 2008: 1)

What the *Bourne* films suggest is that it is not the autonomous subject that is privileged within neoliberal biopower, but the *automatic* subject—the subject with capital who can performatively embrace his or her subordination as danger and discipline. The *Bourne* tragedy conscripts this late modern cultural delusion—the notion that subjectivity, as opposed to subjection, can be secured by its obverse. Bourne's dilemma bespeaks a larger and conflicted cultural

also is a conduit of escape and survival for Bourne, if not a signifier of an alternative to the paranoid/schizoid spiral.

unconscious, one that acutely recognizes the totalizing tendencies of the bioconvergent imperative, and yet, at the same time, is intransigently persuaded by it.

We began this paper with the suggestion that Jason Bourne embodies aspects of both a classical and Shakespearean tragic hero. However, in contrast with these earlier figurations, Bourne's fate is not to die. His tragedy is his perpetual entrapment—his repetitive-compulsive need to resolve the trauma not just of losing, but indeed, of finding himself. Bourne signals a larger cultural melancholia—an existential *cultural* crisis in which phantasies of omnipotence and omni-science elide to drive institutionalities, to privilege unaccountable power and to uncouple conscience from consciousness. In this way, Bourne is the tragic archetype—the lost subject—of the bioconvergent age.

Coda

And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

—T.S. Eliot (1940)

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