

# The Unconscious with Bond and Lacan: Definition by Deviation

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This article argues that the paradox of James Bond's character (that he accords with the idea he represents precisely by deviating from it) is central to a Lacanian understanding of the unconscious (which is considered as a form of disjunctive synthesis – a logical operation that allows conflicting realities to coexist). The Lacanian unconscious is the site on which the possibility for a paradoxical character like James Bond can be framed. This requires a review of both various Bond moments and the role of the Real and Symbolic in the Lacanian unconscious.

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It is perhaps not absurd to suggest that we see through the *enigma encompassing James Bond* – that he embodies the ideal of British spirit precisely by deviating from this ideal itself – the solution to one of the most frequent misconceptions of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The status of James Bond, as a vulgarisation of his own idea, can redeem us from the errant notion that the unconscious is a simple linguistic extension of signifying operations beyond any specific signified idea (that the unconscious is only that aspect of language which is beyond its immediate containment in consciousness). In other words, it is in the fact that Bond is maintained as the ideal of the category that he represents precisely *by* his deviation from this category, that we can understand Lacan's unconscious as a contingency with the Real through a symbolic disjunctive synthesis – that is, as a symbolic operation defining its category by its own break or deviation from it.

Bond exemplifies, in embodying the deviance from his own ideal, the true paradoxical operation of Lacan's symbolic order. The symbolic order is not merely the becoming-political, becoming-discursive, becoming-signifying of some incoherent multiplicity – it is not simply the structuralising of the unstructured. Rather, in order to be symbolic – to operate through language, to constitute intersubjective relationships in reference to the ineradicable “third body” of social-symbolic relationships (the ideological bond summoned by the act of discourse that Lacan calls the big Other [*l'Autre*]) – in order to attain any structuralism *par excellence*, the symbolic must be *in deviation of its own structuralist ideal*.

To understand this, we must see the paradox that constitutes the character of James Bond. What defines Bond is not merely his exemplification of the ideal British gentleman, but his deviance from this ideal. Bond is, in many ways, in ever-indistinguishable excess of the “correct” idea of what he represents. Through his idiosyncratic vulgarities, charlatanism, and debauchery, Bond appears to embody the *negation* of that very ideal that he installs. Whilst written as the devoted, exemplary agent in service of Her Majesty the Queen, an international representative of the British spirit, Bond *becomes* this ideal by “not quite” fitting into it. Variations of some dinner party or restaurant event scene are excessively used in the Bond films (but perhaps most literally depicted in the latest, *No Time to Die* [2021]), where Bond is frequently one of the only guests remaining alive, at the expense of the genuine echelon of which he is the supposed ideal. In a ballroom full of well-dressed, bourgeois party guests we expect Bond's presence to “complete” the scene. In fact, he does this by *not fitting* into the category of high-class, twenty-first-century Wilde-esque guests whose world he represents. Compare this to Badiou's commentary on the horses painted some 30,000 years ago on the *Grotte Chauvet* walls and their extensive logical difference from Picasso's horses (Badiou, 2006). The immanence of differences and contradictions that obscure the horse's relation to man, across 30,000 years of artistic depictions (culminating, as Badiou sees it, in Picasso's morbid and uncanny abstractions of men and horses), is sublated, and what subsists through a series of deviations is nothing less than an underlying idea constructed by its contradicting artistic manifestations: the eternal, ontological *Idea* of the Horse as what defines itself alongside Man. Divergence defines an ideal to its highest degree. Perhaps one of the most Bond-defining scenes in *No Time to Die* is the Spectre-infiltrated party shoot-out, during which Bond and Paloma pause at the bar, into which Bond has just launched himself from the second-story balcony, and share a disheveled, mid-shootout drink. It is precisely through his deviation from the ideal that he represents – the high-end scene, ridiculed by a whisky-shot interlude – that Bond becomes the most infallible example of what he embodies by excess: the stoic, modern British gentleman.



The Althusserian-Lacanian thesis is that the symbolic order is always already in excess of the field that it defines. Political bodies, educational institutions, and social categories all become themselves by being “slightly more” than they *should be* (Althusser, 2020); these symbolic categories always transgress themselves, they are uncontainable under the standards of their own ideals. However, it is directly through these operations that they appropriate their domain of operation. Take, for example, Christian orthodoxy as understood by G. K. Chesterton’s apologetics (Chesterton, 1987): only through its paradoxical constitution, as both the timid order of Christian benevolence and the aggressive ideology of historical world-domination, does Christian orthodoxy supersede any single, targeted criticism (e.g., that Christianity is weak yet that Christian theocracy is despotic) and become a sublime synthesis of contradictory principles. Christian orthodoxy *becomes what it always was* precisely by deviating from any standard narratives that can form the basis of a single critique of the religion. It is easy, maintains Chesterton, to be a heretic (or, correlatively, to be insane): heresy or insanity merely implies selecting a piece of scripture, or a piece of “reality,” and devoting oneself to it. The heretic or the madman ignores the paradoxes constitutive of scripture or reality, and instead remains devoted simply to one or two of its logical constituents. The difficulty, inversely, is to be orthodox or sane: these require an appreciation of the profound paradoxes that make up both reality and scripture. The contradictions in reality (from ontological to phenomenological, including the paradoxes of modern physics: Einsteinian relativity requires masses of various degrees for his conception of space-time to function [Einstein, 2010/1920], yet if a mass is simply made “small enough” – i.e., subatomic – gravity ceases to function according to the laws of general relativity) and in the Old and New Testament (as well as in the history of Christianity and the Church) must be embraced and embodied by the sane man or the orthodox. They become sane or become orthodox precisely by the deviation of their object from the ideal it is intended to present. Reality becomes the realm of the sane man precisely because reality is paradoxically inconsistent. There is an evident affinity of Chesterton’s thesis with Kierkegaard’s “knight

of faith”: this man requires a determination of his freedom in the form of an *act* – an act that embraces the impossibility of the “knight of faith” (such as Abraham faced with the incomprehensible task of killing his son Isaac) to wholly determine its fate (Kierkegaard, 2005/1843). Limitation must be embodied as a paradoxical form of freedom. Deviation is, in this sense, conformity; and thus the limitations in Bond’s accordance with the British ideal fundamentally constitute him as fulfilling this ideal to the highest degree.

To transgress the symbolic ideal, then, is what constitutes the symbolic order. To be in excess of the conventions characterising the ideal British gentlemen, in excess to the point of vulgarity, is how Bond appropriates-by-deviation the high-spirit of *Britishness*. Consider, for example, what would have been the romantic *culmen* of Vesper and Bond’s flirtations throughout *Casino Royale* [2006]:

Vesper Lynd: You know James, I just want you to know that if all that was left of you was your smile and your little finger, you’d still be more of a man than anyone I’ve ever met.

James Bond: *That’s because you know what I can do with my little finger.*

This vulgar Bond, the renegade-debaucherous Bond uncontrollable by M (a dynamic established even in the first minutes of *Dr No* [1962]), *must be* the same Bond as that stoically unshakeable, emotionally impenetrable British culture-hero; the sexually deviant Bond can only be the same Bond who escorted Queen Elizabeth II to the London Olympic Games. This is the key to Lacan’s symbolic order. Characteristically, the symbolic is not merely a “locus of signification,” as vulgar Lacanians may put it, but is in recurring excess of itself – the symbolic embodies the instance, which it installs itself, of its own breach, its own disruption (Lacan, 2008). The presence of the symbolic subsists by appropriating, and supplementing, the self-defeating deviance from itself, which it installs as a testament to the undying ideas themselves born from the symbolic.



This breach that the symbolic installs within itself, that disruption which renders impossible a completely closed correspondence of the symbolic with itself, is the *Real*. It is the point where the paradoxical structural operation of language opens to the enigmatic body of multiplicity – an unstable, non-signifiable body of operations known only retroactively by their demonstrable, yet unknowable, derivatives. In other words, the Real is the point of non-correspondence of the symbolic to itself; the disjunction of a transgressive body of multiplicity that denies the logical commensurability of symbolic positivities to themselves.

Here we understand the unconscious as *disjunctive synthesis*, to borrow a phrase of Deleuze's. The unconscious is that point of contingency, instituted by the symbolic, between *abstracted signification* (beyond the logical coherency of language) and the *Real* (the de-structuring breach in the symbolic, irreducible to the symbolic structure of language itself). This was expressed by Lacan in the fact that "the category of the real is installed by the symbolic" (Lacan, 1970). Hence the possibility of existence of the irreducible, enigmatic component (the Real) of language, emerges only *in consequence of the symbolic itself*. This is how Bond installs his own breach, and becomes himself by embodying the negation that emerges subsequent to his already-existing. Bond the British gentleman is an ideal exalted by appropriating its deviation in the form of Bond the vulgar eroticist. A deluge of phallic references fuse themselves to Bond's gentlemanly presentation. "I have been known to keep my tip up," followed by a swift raise of his sword to subtly imitate a penis, is Pierce Brosnan's natural response to Vesper's (Madonna's) inquiry of Bond's ability to "handle his weapon well" whilst fencing (*Die Another Day*, 2002). From referencing his sexual activities – "A little restless but I got off eventually," in response to being asked how he slept the night after Bond slept with May Day (*A View to Kill*, 1985) – to directly referencing his penis – Bond: Well my dear, I take it you spend quite a lot of time in the saddle. // Jenny Flex: Yes, I love an early morning ride. // Bond: Well, I'm an early riser myself (*A View to Kill*) – a central feature of Bond's Britishness is that he constitutively deviates from this ideal in the form of uninhibited debauchery and sexual obscenities. The symbolic order in fact institutes its own negation in the form of the Real, and by a supplemented deviation of synthesising this disjunction, the symbolic must define itself, in Bond-esque fashion, by being in excess of its own categories. It is this self-digression that explains the romance of Bond and the possibility for an unconscious that is both abstracted symbolism and Real: disjunctive synthesis: *being itself by its own transgression*.





Like Derrida, Lacan saw that what defined the operations of language (the medium of the symbolic order) was precisely what was elided, what was structurally uncontainable in the enigmatic operations of language. Derrida would develop this to emphasise the unique primacy of writing over speech by the *arche-trace*, which is retroactively afforded a supplementary origin, and in so doing Derrida purged metaphysics of the ideals of *presence* or *centre* (Derrida, 2016). Lacan, however, aimed to see in language a structure that constituted itself precisely by its irregular and enigmatic formations, which appeared ‘in excess’ of the communicative function of language itself, the traces of what was made uncontainable the moment language made something knowable. Lacan had emphasised that the emergence of the Subject is by its suturing into the symbolic chains of signifiers through which language, and the Other, orchestrates inter-subjective relationships (2007a). The Subject, the (non-)individual, exists only as filling the hole that is instituted by the demand for existence that it makes reciprocally with his own emergence (2007b). Bond’s vulgarity is thus subsequent to his being a subject, but it is a deviation that retroactively constitutes Bond as always having been this vulgar subject-as-ideal. This, too, is incidentally why Daniel Craig’s Bond retroactively affords a consistency-by-deviation to Sean Connery’s Bond. *Dr No* left audiences, and even Ian Fleming himself, confused. No consistent idea of the Bond character was discerned amongst viewers, and he was described as merely managing to “always seem slightly silly” by *Time* magazine. *Casino Royale* (2006), however – which is not coincidentally the first Bond *novel* – embraced this inconsistency of the Bond ideal: Bond is depicted in the most extreme sense as that unfazed, stoic gambler (literally dying and coming back to life during the game), an evident caricature of the opening shot (“Bond ... James Bond”) of Sean Connery in *Dr No*. By pushing this extreme, along with the extreme of a vulgar Bond who brags about the sexual prowess of his little finger, a mediated consistency is introduced to Bond. By embodying his own deviation, the Bond of *Casino Royale* reifies the sublime consistent inconsistency of *Dr No*’s Bond.



Crucially for Lacan, Crucially for Lacan, the unconscious expresses itself as produced in a contingency with the Real. It is not simply an “extension of language or signifying chains.” The unconscious expresses itself as that paradoxical contingency with the Real, from which it becomes what it is not – Bond, in this sense, becomes what he *is not* by the intrusion of the Real in his appropriation of the ideal he represents. The unconscious is “the knowledge that only sustains itself in presenting itself as impossible, so that from that it is confirmed as being real” (Lacan, 1970). That which nevertheless made the unconscious irreducible to linguistic functions and contingent with the alterity of the Real was a function itself instituted by the symbolic (linguistic), by the fact that the symbolic “installs” the Real and the unconscious simultaneously, and returns to self-identity by supplementing its own negation.

There is an evident Hegelian operation underlying this definition of Bond. This lies in the formula of the essence of Spirit not only in the form of Substance, but also as Subject. The subject, as a part of Spirit itself, reflexively questions the substance of which it is an extension. The questioning subject installs a moment of disparity whereby substance forms a deviation from itself in the negativity of questioning. Spirit, in other words, constitutes itself through a negative determination, through itself vis-à-vis itself, and thus becomes identical with its essence by the internal negative disruption introduced by appearing as subject.

The disparity which exists in consciousness between the “I” and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the *negative* in general. This can be regarded as the *defect* of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. . . . Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject. When it has shown this completely, Spirit has made its existence identical with its essence. (Hegel 1979/1807, p. 21)

This self-disjunction introduced internally by a substance that self-reflexively questions itself, that constitutes the identity and essence of Spirit itself, is doubled identically in Bond’s character. The ideal Bond allows itself to be questioned, internally, by its

constitutive deviation from itself. Bond's sexual innuendos serve as a precise example of this identity-by-deviation. Another example can be taken from *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969). Posing as Sir Hilary Bray at a dinner with a group of young women (Ernst Stavro Blofeld's "angels of death"), Bond attempts to seduce the young patient and sleeper-agent Ruby Bartlett. After being interrupted in his advances by Blofeld's subordinate Irma Blunt, Ruby inconspicuously scribbles her hotel room number on Bond's exposed thigh under the table. Expressing his evident arousal by this intimate act with a strained and awkward face, and asked by Irma whether something is wrong, Bond quietly replies: "Just a slight stiffness coming on ... in the shoulder." This "stiffness" obviously does not originate in his shoulder, and this thinly veiled reference to his uncontrolled sexual arousal is a sharp deviation from the unshaken, stoic spirit that Bond presents. However, it is precisely such deviations, the installation of a disruptive vulgarity (in the form of uncomfortable innuendos) within an ideal that opposes it that comes to constitute Bond, not only as the rogue secret agent, but as the gentleman undeniably qualified to represent the grandeur of *Her Majesty's Secret Service*.



Hence Bond becomes "Bond, James Bond" by the propping up of his Symbolic ideal by its self-reflexive disruption in the Real. We take another example, from the lascivious *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), in which Bond is caught off-guard in his hotel room by a set of well-dressed gang members, each one pointing their pistols at the aging Sean Connery. In the adjacent room, Bond's latest sexual pursuit, "Plenty O'Toole," lies naked on the bed. Realising the predicament he is in as he faces three loaded barrels, Bond calmly looks around at the intruders before saying, "I'm afraid you've caught me with more than my hands up," after which the naked Plenty is thrown by the thugs out of the hotel window into the ground-floor pool. Once again, we have a vulgar reference to his own erect penis, a reference that is nothing less than the Real, which penetrates the Symbolic ideal (of the British gentleman) from which it is born (for the message in this obscene comment is evidently that only such a sophisticated character as Bond could conceive of such a subtle yet discomfiting reference to his sexual functions).





It is not a negation of the British Symbolic spirit to make such a comment, but it is rather its constitution *par excellence*, when this “piece of Real” is uttered by a character always-already under the grip of this Symbolic order. Countless examples are produced by Bond to show that he maintains his ideal precisely by deviating from it. Consider, additionally, Roger Moore’s ending line in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). Having escaped the destruction of the *Atlantis* underwater base using an escape pod, Bond and Anya Amasova proceed to make love in their enclosed capsule. On being picked up by a Navy vessel, the pair are met with the outraged and shocked faces of their supervisors, who question Bond’s reason for being naked in bed with a woman during a top-secret mission. Bond’s response is a smoothly delivered yet undeniably sexual one: “Keeping the British end up, sir.”



Or take, in *Skyfall* (2012), Daniel Craig’s response whilst tied up in a chair and subject to Raoul Silva’s seductive hand movements across Bond’s chest and thighs. “There is a first time for everything,” says Silva as he strokes Bond’s immobile legs, to which he whispers, “What makes you think this is my first time?” At times it seems his innuendos are excessive enough to escape the attention of their female addressees: After the soaking wet, and half-dressed Fatima Blush stumbles into Bond in *Never Say Never Again* (1983) and apologises for making him wet, he responds with, “Yes, but my martini is still dry,” emphasising the ambiguity of what part of him is in fact “wet.”



Bond is defined precisely by embodying the self-installed deviation he makes from the ideal he represents. Bond is British stoicism precisely by appealing to, and instituting within this ideal, a deviation in the form of excessive, sexual vulgarities and obscenities. This disruption instituted from *within* the operation of his Symbolic character is what allows Bond to be mediately reunited with his essence. It is precisely such an operation that the symbolic makes, through disjunctive synthesis, that takes the unconscious away from its vulgar linguistic conception and into contingency with the Real. The unconscious allows for the coexistence of opposing symbolic realities, and for their coexistence to be produced precisely via their disjunction. In other words, the Lacanian unconscious is the site on which the possibility for a paradoxical character like James Bond can be framed.

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