



FACT SHEET

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Film Reviews

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Lights, Camera but – especially – Action

The expression “motion picture” contains within it one of the essential ingredients of movie making – that is, the concept of “motion” or, to use another word, action. The idea has been around for a long time and in fact what are regarded as the very first movies ever screened – the productions of the Lumiere Brothers in 1895 – were simply about action.

These movies depicted simple, everyday topics such as the bustle of street scenes in Paris or the arrival of a train at a station. The Lumieres’ first train sequence – uncut and lasting all of fifty seconds – has become one of the best-known examples of pioneering cinema. Audiences flocked to the Lumieres’ experimental screenings and found wonder and delight in the movement which they saw on screen.

It wasn’t long before movie-makers added a further element to the new medium in the form of stories. The stories were chosen to provide a more interesting context within which movement could take place. By the time the first Western, *The Great Train Robbery*, was released in 1903 its creators, Thomas Edison and Edwin S. Porter, were using quite sophisticated cinematic techniques to tell a story – and the story itself was crammed with dramatic action.

Audiences quickly became entranced by the thrills which the screen could provide. It’s been said that when one of the robbers in this first Western pointed his pistol directly at the camera and fired, members of the early audiences were so involved in the action that they ducked for cover.

In the year following the release of *The Great Train Robbery* a showman named George C. Hale devised a way of adding even more action to the movie experience by creating a theatre which itself moved while the audience watched the movie. The theatre was designed to resemble a railway carriage and the clever positioning of projection screens was designed to give the audience the impression that they were rolling through scenic countryside while the carriage in which they were riding rattled, clanked and shook just like a real one. This quirky idea was no flash in the pan: it rapidly became very popular and Hale’s Tours were franchised to hundreds of venues throughout North America and Great Britain. This network of venues resulted in a growing demand for more and more varied movie material and in doing so effectively laid the foundations upon which the motion picture industry was built.

The Silent Era was all about action. The mention of silent movies instantly brings to mind images such as a Keystone comedy with the baton-waving Kops involved in a frenetic car chase or perhaps you might think of a serial melodrama with the plucky heroine tied to the railway line and seemingly doomed as the smoke-billowing freight train thunders down the track towards her.

Then came the talkies and the movies were changed forever. Action took a backseat to dialogue. Initially the experimental sound technology meant that cameras and microphones had to be shut in by a sound-proofed studio and, for a while, movies lost the helter-skelter tearaway notion of action first and foremost. Movies came to resemble stage plays on film.

However, as the sound technology advanced, some movie-makers were able to break the shackles of the studio and put back the *motion* into motion pictures. Eventually the industry settled down into producing a variety of movie styles – some with a greater emphasis on dialogue and others in which action was the predominant element.

I must confess that I like a good action movie.

I derive great delight from that charge of excitement that a well-made action movie with a good plot will deliver. OK – sometimes it helps if you have nurtured your childlike ability to suspend your disbelief about what's happening on the screen - although, if we are honest, we really have to go through a process of suspending our disbelief to some degree for almost all movies that we see. Even a “slice of life” drama is not a *real* slice of life – it's a dramatised fabrication.

If I happen to see a really good action movie I feel quite grateful that someone has gone to the enormous trouble and expense to create a convincing universe on screen which I can safely visit. Such a movie can carry me off to a different world for the two hours or so of its duration. If it works really well it can be quite an adventure.

So when I went along to see *The Bourne Ultimatum*, the third in this series of action-packed adventure flicks, I had high hopes and expectations. Unfortunately I came away somewhat disappointed. Although the first two *Bourne* movies – *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy* - delivered the goods splendidly, *The Bourne Ultimatum* fell disappointingly short of the mark. It felt tired and repetitive. It was as if the production team had cannibalised the first two movies for ideas in order to cobble together a third.

I loved the first two *Bourne* movies - in which Matt Damon played the character of Jason Bourne, an agreeable-looking young man who regains consciousness after a failed attempt on his life and finds that he has no recollection of his real identity.

He also finds that – for reasons that he is unaware of - people still seem to be determined to want bump him off. Fortunately, for him, however, he discovers that he has great skills of self-preservation and, when not being hunted, he himself can become a very lethal hunter.

The theme of the *Bourne* movies, based on the writings of author Robert Ludlum, provides an intriguing foundation for a very dangerous voyage of self-discovery as Jason Bourne battles his way through a veritable gauntlet of life-threatening situations in order to find out who he really is and thereby reclaim his lost identity. The motivations of the main character are thus pretty elemental – a fight for survival as he struggles toward the Holy Grail of re-discovering his true self.

This is a well-tried concept which, down the years, with variations to plot and location has provided the basis for a number of action movies – both good and bad.

The Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts drama from 1997, *Conspiracy Theory*, comes to mind as one of the good ones. However, the first two *Bourne* movies were given an extra edge by the inclusion of two interesting secondary characters- both of them women. One of them, played with a steely reserve by Joan Allen, is an coldly efficient CIA operative who is partly responsible for trying to track down Jason in order to eliminate him. The other woman is a footloose traveller of no fixed abode who inadvertently becomes caught up in Jason Bourne's

dangerous world. This woman, who eventually becomes Bourne's help-mate and lover, is played by German actress Franke Potente whose enigmatic face is perfect for the role of the woman who, at first against her will and then against her better judgement, becomes drawn into the puzzling and lethal life of Jason Bourne.

This character, inhabited with such skill by Franke Potente, adds greatly to the interest of the first two *Bourne* movies. We pretty quickly learn that Jason Bourne himself is tough and, probably, invulnerable. However, although his lady friend demonstrates that she's very streetwise, we sense that she is not invulnerable. In dramatic terms, she therefore becomes Bourne's Achilles' Heal – the chink in his armour. She's the Lois Lane to Bourne's Superman. She's an ordinary person caught up in extraordinary events. She is therefore someone that we, the audience, can relate to and, to some degree, identify with.

Paradoxically, it's her *weakness* which adds *strength* to the unfolding of the plot. So, including such a character into a movie has a two-pronged effect: because we know she's vulnerable her presence raises the dramatic tension throughout the movie and, secondly, because we begin to really care about what might happen to this character we, the audience, become more deeply absorbed by the movie.

And that, after all, is what we are there for. Although she fades from view fairly early in the second *Bourne* movie it's the very fact of her disappearance that initiates and propels the action which ensures that the second movie maintains the same degree of pace and audience involvement as the first.

Now the other side of this coin is that, in the third movie, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, the absence of Franke Potente's character - except via some brief flashbacks – is one of the factors that makes this movie much less engaging than the first two. This movie attempts, without success, to supplant the Franke Potente character by expanding the role of another female character who has now appeared in all three movies, CIA agent Nicky Parsons, played by Julia Stiles.

However, the character of Parsons doesn't have the dimensions or layers to make her strongly interesting. As well as being impeded by the absence of a major supporting character, *The Bourne Ultimatum* disappoints by containing too little dramatic tension and relying too heavily on really silly car chases. I gave it two and a half stars – far short of the four and half star ratings which I gave the first two *Bourne* movies.

In closing, fans of Deborah Kerr, one of the great ladies of the screen, will have been saddened to learn of her death in recent days. Scottish-born Deborah Kerr passed away aged 86 of Parkinsons Disease. She is best remembered for her performances in the 1950's especially in *The King and I*, *From here to Eternity*, and *Heaven Knows Mr. Allison*. She was nominated for Oscars on six occasions without ever receiving a performance Oscar but, in 1994, was given an Honorary Oscar for her contribution to motion pictures.

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