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## Real men: Sam Smith's emasculation of the James Bond theme

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### ABSTRACT

In *Spectre* (2015), British pop star Sam Smith contributed the James Bond theme *The Writing's on the Wall* and in so doing was accused of emasculating the towering figure of Bond who has been the epitome of 'manliness' since the franchise's inception in 1962. In this article I argue that Smith's voice discomfited many of its critics because it penetrated the Bond universe with its passivity, revealing the enigmatic nature of masculinity in a franchise that has attempted to rebrand itself as an authentic representation of masculinity in the current moment. By giving Bond an 'authentic' voice, Smith's theme song laid bare Bond's emptiness and, in the process, undermined Smith's own claim to authenticity. I argue that the weight of the franchise's history precludes any real, deep-rooted, authentic 'unveiling' of Bond's character. As such authenticity is impossible, Smith's Bond might have challenged Bond's masculinity on the surface, but ultimately it could not disrupt Bond's elusiveness.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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'The question was, and is', as Neil Bartlett says of the trial of 1895 in his moving book about Oscar Wilde, 'who speaks, and when, and for whom, and why' (Brett 1994, p. 23).

The James Bond film series has produced a long series of 'event' style pop confections, some immediately forgotten and others that have entered into the pop musical cannon such as Shirley Bassey's *Goldfinger* (1964) and *Diamonds are Forever* (1971). As Adrian Daub and Charles Kronengold point out in their uneven book *The James Bond Songs: Pop Anthems of Late Capitalism* (2015b), confecting a perfect James Bond song is not as easy as it appears because of the balancing act that it has to perform. It has to at once feel like a James Bond song while at the same time conform to the top-40 conventions of the time (2015b). It has to adhere to tradition while at the same time update the sound. No wonder Daub and Kronengold suggest that the James Bond songs 'are precisely the kind of pop music that makes you feel old' (2015b, p. 4). Bassey set the standard with her majestic voice in the 1960s and 1970s and since then current pop stars seek to nestle in that tradition, which with few exceptions is dominated by female voices (Gladys Knight, Patti LaBelle, Tina Turner, Adele). In the latest incarnation *Spectre* (2015) Sam Smith's *The Writing's on the Wall* certainly left some commentators shaken and stirred, feeling as if Smith's falsetto was doing something strange to James Bond's manhood. As the authors of the book *The James Bond Songs* (2015) put it in their article in *The Conversation* (Daub & Kronengold 2015a):

It seems that Smith confronts the Bond songs' last taboo: thou shalt not challenge traditional masculinity. Even though the songs have rarely, if ever, sought to mimic Bond's manliness, they seem to have a much easier time with masculine-sounding women than with feminine-sounding men.

My intention here is to question *why* Smith's incarnation of the Bond song can be considered an attack on Bond's masculinity. Is it because Smith is an openly gay British pop star? Does it have anything to do with how Daniel Craig's version of Bond reconfigured masculinity as some theorists argue? Or does it point to something darker and more pernicious? I suggest that Smith's voice is discomfiting not because it is emoting in what is supposed to be an unemotional universe but because it is penetrating that universe with its passivity. In *Spectre*, Craig's brooding face and Smith's falsetto meet and conjoin, mirroring each other. If it were just another Sam Smith song it would have been largely ignored. Unlike previous Bond songs that set a mood of campiness and sexy danger, however, Smith's song reveals something about the enigmatic nature of masculinity in the Bond franchise and connects to wider debates around what is authentic in the sexualised representation of the male body across current mediascapes.

Much has been written about the towering figure of James Bond – whether the James Bond films have something to tell us about our contemporary world today. Other research has explored what constitutes a James Bond fan (men over 35 who drink vodka, shaken not stirred; see Burgess 2015, p. 231) the connection between Bond and the American men's magazine *Playboy* (Hines 2009), and of course James Bond and the fundamental shifts in the representation of masculinity over the 24 films that compose the series (Cox 2014). Despite being a fictional character, there is interest in how a character spanning decades reflects a certain kind of paradigm of masculinity, a paradigm that is difficult to divorce from the actors who play Bond.

The latest version is of course Craig who plays a less experienced and more vulnerable Bond. According to Susan Burgess, Craig's Bond films 'offer an intriguing reconfiguration of Bond's masculinity that is connected to and reflects a more contemporary understanding of gender that, in turn, aligns with a decidedly more inclusive attitude towards homosexuality' (2015, p. 242). Although previous Bonds such as Sean Connery were also sold as sex symbols, the Craig Bond films have intensified the gaze on the male body. In the first publicity still of *Casino Royale* where Craig emerges from the sea in a swimsuit John Mercer wryly observes (2013, p. 81):

The sun bounces on the surface of an aquamarine ocean that perfectly matches both the swimsuit and Craig's disconcertingly blue eyes. His glistening body is smooth and sculpted, and the shimmering lighting provides a heightened, fantasy quality to the scenario.

If there is an excessiveness in the representation of Craig's Bond that borders on fetishization, as an object of the (male? female? queer?) gaze, this is coupled with the brooding depth that Craig gives the new Bond. We ought to not only want to have sex with him but to understand him, peer into his empty eyes and contemplate the prior events that have left him tortured and vulnerable. Craig does the best he can to give Bond this depth despite the limited options the writing offers him. In a mediascape overrun by antiheroes with a backstory the Bond franchise has had no choice but to adapt to the marketplace. Although Bond has always been old-fashioned, the pre-Craig Bond really feels outdated in an era that gave us the more rounded and complex characters of Don Draper, Tony

Soprano and Walter White. Sam Mendes' direction is as mesmerising as Craig's muscles and Craig's brooding face hints at both darkness and sensitivity. Mendes and Craig gave the Bond franchise what it had been missing this millennium: a kind of authenticity.

In such a context it is perhaps not surprising that the Bond franchise opted for Sam Smith to sing the latest theme song. A new kind of pop star moulded in the Adele tradition, Smith is a crooner in that particular British convention that straddles the middle-of-the-road with English humility and sincerity, traits that are sold to us as authentically true. Although his music is not new it sounds fresh in the current EDM-dominated musicscape. Adele's *Skyfall* was a skyrocketing success. Smith was thus an obvious no-brainer who could perform Daub and Kronengold's balancing act: respecting the tradition while fitting into the pop charts. The reaction to the song's premiere, however, was riddled with male anxiety and excessive concern. Some choice selections from Spencer Kornhaber's review in *The Atlantic* include (2015):

Smith's quavering voice and fussy phrasing have already made him the rare modern pop star who's controversial for purely musical reasons, and lo, the kneejerk reaction on Twitter to *Writing's on the Wall* has been to compare the song to the sounds of cats mewling. Smith sounds so fragile that you could argue he's subverting the franchise or betraying it. The James Bond character is lizardlike and amoral, a sex machine who's always made to regret the rare instances when he allows a woman to hold power over him. The Craig era has complicated this notion, but not to the extent that Smith now has. Handwringing about a supposed cultural assault on masculinity awaits, no doubt.

Craig's Bond is sold to us as a more authentic Bond on a number of levels. The latest films have removed many of the far-fetched and fantastical action sequences and gadgets. This is a Bond that functions in a seemingly 'real' world. Yet as much as the producers attempt to rein in the franchise, the weight of its past is perhaps too much to shake off. The franchise has too many conventions to break, too many memories to forget, for a real authentic break to occur. As much as the Bond creators have attempted to create a tortured Bond there is no escaping the fact that when the song starts in the film, Craig takes the stage 'impassive as ever' (Thorn 2015, p. 55). Craig's and Mendes's adjustments to the franchise are just that: mere nods to what is happening in the 'real' world but without the driving impulse to truly subvert the franchise, to challenge the capitalist nature of the whole enterprise. Unable to provide the new Bond with a multi-layered authenticity *Spectre* appropriates Smith's pop authenticity. As Tracey Thorn in *The New Statesman* puts it, 'All the emoting is done for him by the gloriously camp melodrama of the song' (2015, p. 55). Whose voice is it we are hearing? In order for Craig's Bond to be authentic he needs Sam Smith's voice. What purpose does a Bond song serve if it is not to provide some kind of insight, even if that insight is limited to setting a mood? In fact, couldn't the 'queering' of the James Bond Song by Smith point to a desire by the filmmakers to give Bond some sort of authenticity? These are not empty lyrics:

A million shards of glass  
That haunt me from my past  
As the stars begin to gather  
And the light begins to fade  
When all hope begins to shatter  
Know that I won't be afraid

Smith's falsetto is shadowing Bond, attempting to penetrate his cold façade, to let the audience know that in *this* film, you will finally learn something about the 'real' Bond, not just the caricature. And Smith's lyrics dig deeper than any previous Bond song; deeper than Adele's *Skyfall*.

In *Queering the Pitch*, a collection of articles on gay and lesbian musicology, Wayne Koestenbaum wrote about his engagement with Clara Schumann's work: 'May music escape, for good, the fate of presumed straightness. May music at last be subject to the critic's seduction' (1994, p. 1). More than two decades later, Smith's *The Writing's on the Wall* is evidence that the musical closet has collapsed, that Smith has indeed escaped the dreary fate of presumed straightness. Yet, Smith has been unable to seduce the critics with his music, especially with his Bond song, echoing Ned Rorem's suggestion that he feels 'more discriminated against as an artist than as a homosexual' (Brett 1994, p. 18). Smith's openness with his sexuality is welcomed, even celebrated, yet when he uses his voice to give Bond depth, a back story, a narrative, there is an uncomfortable slippage. It is as though Smith is exposing Bond's white male privilege, suggesting that the writing's indeed on the wall, that Bond's masculinity must finally be tamed.

Instead of giving Bond an authentic voice, however, Smith has inadvertently unmasked him and unmasked himself. Authenticity cannot be given, it needs to be earned. The power of Bond is such that he remains as elusive as ever. He may not be authentic, but we still watch him, rapt in his withdrawn, cynical, yet active, disposition. It is Smith, rather, who had his authenticity taken away from him. At the premiere of *Spectre* in London, Smith appeared wearing a white tuxedo jacket and black bow tie, his stubble manicured, his smile stoic. On the cover of the single, moreover, he does his best Craig impression. Gone is the slightly overweight and 'effeminate' boy from suburban London. Smith had become Bond: handsome, masculine and straight acting. If the question was, and is, 'who speaks, and when, and for whom and why' (Brett 1994, p. 23) then this whole episode illustrates that Smith had no hope in convincing the world he could give Bond an authentic voice. Bond persists, indicating that perhaps all that is really necessary to sell to the public in the new millennium is just a veneer of authenticity. It remains to be seen whether Smith can still sell his 'authentic' heartbreak as his career progresses. He might think twice about lending his passive lyrics to another Bond-like figure again. The interesting question is whether it is Bond that has failed us or whether we have failed Bond. It wouldn't surprise me if Bond would think the latter.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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