

Jason Bourne again

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Directed by Paul Greengrass; written by Greengrass and Christopher Rouse

It has been 14 years since Matt Damon first portrayed the Jason Bourne character created in the Robert Ludlum novels. The former CIA assassin and victim of memory loss has spent several films trying to uncover the truth about his past, growing increasingly disturbed by what he learns.

At the end of *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), Bourne appeared to have found the answers he was looking for. He exposed to the world the criminal operations of the CIA. Wounded and floating in New York City's East River, he swam off to an uncertain future. (The Damon character did not appear in *The Bourne Legacy*, 2012, ostensibly the fourth film in the series, despite its title.)

In the latest installment, simply entitled *Jason Bourne*, the former assassin now ekes out a living by fighting in bare-knuckle boxing matches in Greece. This is where Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles) finds him. A former CIA agent herself, in hiding since her last adventures with Bourne, she has just hacked into an agency database and stolen several classified files, including some containing still more secrets about Bourne's past. "It could be worse than [whistleblower Edward] Snowden," says one agency analyst of the data breach.

Agent Heather Lee (Alicia Vikander), who oversees the CIA's cyber espionage work, is alerted to the hack. She teams with CIA Director Robert Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones) to track down Bourne and Nicky and prevent the information from becoming public. Lee wants to bring Bourne back in from the cold. Dewey wants him dead and sends an assassin known only as "the asset" (Vincent Cassel) to take him out.

At the same time, Dewey is in the process of convincing "social media giant" Aaron Kalloor (Riz Ahmed) to grant him access to the user data from his popular websites. Privacy versus security, described as

"the major question of our day," is the theme around which the entire movie is constructed.

For reasons which are ultimately more personal than political, Bourne reluctantly goes to war with the CIA yet again.

There are moments in the new Bourne film that give one hope: perhaps all of this will amount to something. Certain encounters between Dewey and the social media CEO stand out. "Privacy is freedom," the nervous entrepreneur says to Dewey. "You didn't believe in privacy when we funded your start-up and made you a billionaire," Dewey snaps back.

In another chilling scene, Dewey tells "the asset" to leave his current assignment and take care of Bourne. "I'm not finished here," the asset complains. Dewey tells him coldly, "Close your account in Rome." The asset immediately walks to a dingy bathroom in which a bound and tortured man sits bleeding in a bath tub. He kills him without a second thought.

Many of today's "current events" find their way into *Jason Bourne*. One sees major protests taking place in Greece (actually one of the Canary Islands doubling as Greece). Then there is the connection between giant corporations and US intelligence agencies and the matter of Snowden and the leaking of classified documents. The film also acknowledges the lies and pretexts used to justify US military and intelligence operations. One sits up in one's seat when such things come up, hoping something good will come out of them. It doesn't, really. Not here.

The fast-paced and kinetic, but non-committal and unreflective style of director Paul Greengrass (*Bloody Sunday*, *United 93*, *Green Zone*, *Captain Phillips*) helps to ensure that any references to real life in the film remain just that—references, and passing ones at that. For the most part, this is all background. Another way to decorate the set. One is constantly aware that something more should and *must* be done with such

material. But this is yet another film which only “hints at” or “suggests” or “indicates” something about the real world. One is eager to really dive in and get to the heart of things.

The Bourne films all tend to follow the same formula. Bourne is first introduced to new clues about his past, then he is hunted by the CIA, before turning their own surveillance equipment against them. He then exposes the spy agency to Congress or the news media, as if both weren't thoroughly implicated in such operations to begin with.

Many of the goings-on become repetitive and tedious, especially after five entries in the film series. At a certain point, one feels as though one is watching a movie consisting of little more than Matt Damon entering and exiting the train stations and airports of major European cities.

In the end, the most significant obstacles to making something more out of this material are the filmmakers' very limited understanding of the world they live in and their inability or unwillingness to resist the pressure to conform to and accommodate the status quo.

The name of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden is mentioned at various times throughout *Jason Bourne*. Damon, for his part, came out publicly in Snowden's defense in a 2013 interview with the BBC, saying, “I think it's a great thing that he did.” Around the same time, Damon told Black Entertainment Television that Obama “broke up with him” and that he questioned “the legality of the drone strikes and these NSA revelations.”

By 2015, Damon and Obama had patched things up. Now Damon described the individual at the head of the government responsible for those drone strikes and NSA programs as “a remarkable human being” who was “shockingly easy to be around.”

“I don't ever question that it's coming from the right place with him,” Damon reassured the press.

The problems and pressures revealed in that turnabout, as much as anything else, explain why *Jason Bourne* is ultimately such a poor film.



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