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Bond Rerouted: 007 and the Internal Conflict in/of Digital Media

Johannes Binotto

While the James Bond that we know from the movies is equipped with almost superhuman qualities, the original character in Ian Fleming's novels seems much more fragile. Being in constant battle not only with the political enemy but also with his internal, neurotic conflicts, Bond needs his missions as defense mechanisms to prevent him from psychological breakdown. This essay argues that the second to last installment of the Bond movie series, the 2008 film *Quantum of Solace* finally confronts this neurotic aspect of 007, not so much by psychologizing the character but rather by transposing internal conflict to the filmic level. The complex visual strategies of digitally enhanced filmmaking, with its over-determined images, depict a conflicted war zone where not only the secret agent but also the very system he is defending is shown as being ultimately split and pitted against itself.

In his landmark reading of Ian Fleming's Bond novels, Umberto Eco states that what makes them so attractive for a mass audience is how they systematically exclude any form of neurosis from their narrative (Eco 242). To be more precise, one could say that they manage to do so by constantly replacing inner turmoil with physical violence. It is only through this exchange that Bond becomes what Fausto Antonini has called "the flat man, without mental dimension, without complexes, without dark, inscrutable or abysmal psychic zones" (Antonini 162). The secret agent "evades the repressed unconscious by fleeing into action" (166). Physical conflict supersedes psychological conflict. It seems that bodily pain is still easier for our hero to deal with than emotional distress.

Bond going to pieces

As successful as Bond's escapes into action may be, there is the constant danger that neurosis will rear its ugly head the moment 007 has accomplished his dangerous mission. This seems to be the predicament in the very first Bond novel *Casino Royale*. In its awkward ending, the hitherto cold blooded 007 turns into a both inhibited and insecure lover who may be able to go to bed with Vesper Lynd, the woman he wants to marry, but who is unable to have even one simple straightforward talk with her. His inability to prevent his beloved from committing suicide seems to give further evidence of the agent's utter helplessness. This helplessness is all the more telling in comparison to the ordeals Bond has gone through in the preceding chapters. Having just barely survived a brutal and conspicuous torture of his testicles by the hand of his opponent Le Chiffre, Bond was eager to reassure not only himself, and Vesper, but also the reader of his still intact sexual potency. However, in his inability to rescue Vesper, Bond is shown to be impotent in a much more fundamental sense. While the biological organ may still function properly, our hero seems unable to secure what in Lacanian psychoanalysis is called the "symbolic phallus," the signifier of the symbolic mandate the man has to take on in relation to the woman (Evans 142-143). Bond's discovery that Vesper Lynd was in fact a double agent working for Russian intelligence comes all the more as a relief, since it forces Bond back into his job and thus back into action. By switching one mandate for another, 007 regains the phallic power that was under threat in his romantic engagement. The secret agent, who wanted to hand in his resignation in order to lead a normal life, discovers that there is no such thing for him. Even the love for which he was ready to quit the spy world was nothing more than an espionage charade. What was first believed to be a personal matter turns out to be just another occurrence in the line of duty and, hence, emotional distress must be replaced by cool professionalism. The infamous closing line of the book "The bitch is dead now" seems emblematic of this development. Its sheer cruelty is meant to convince us that Bond's emotional detachment is now complete: escape into action accomplished.

The novel *Casino Royale* thus ultimately turns out to be a protective fantasy about eluding neurosis. This interpretation is even more convincing if one takes into account Ian Fleming's frequently repeated claim that he started to write the first Bond novel in order "to take my mind off the shock of getting married at the age of 43" (Pearson 113). The Bond character himself hence becomes a symptom staving off neurotic anxieties about emotional commitment. Nonetheless, for at least a couple of pages, it is obvious how fragile this "blunt instrument"

– as Bond was called by his creator (Stock 260) – in fact really is. This frailty of the Bond character, which is obliquely hinted at in several novels, will come to full light again in the second to last novel by Fleming, the bizarre *You Only Live Twice*. When early in the novel the British secret service ask for a psychiatric report on Bond's health, the analyst comes to the conclusion that 007 is “going slowly to pieces” (Fleming, *You Only Live Twice* 30). In fact, this statement will turn out to be rather an understatement since here, Fleming undertakes no less than a complete deconstruction of his main character. The novel begins with Bond clinically depressed and suicidal, still mourning the loss of his wife Tracy, whom he married in the preceding novel *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. Unreliable as a secret agent, he is given a mission which is virtually impossible and although he succeeds, his persona does not survive: After having killed his arch-enemy Ernst Stavro Blofeld and destroyed his refuge, a Japanese island completely infested with poisonous plants and insects, Bond suffers from amnesia. He believes himself to be a Japanese fisherman – the undercover identity he had chosen for this mission. Bond even forgets how to perform sexual intercourse, and it is only with the help of a *Kama-Sutra*-like “pillow book” given to him by his girlfriend Kissy Suzuki that he regains his sexual aptitude. When his memory seems to return – after he reads the word “Vladivostok” on a scrap of newspaper –, it is insinuated that he believes himself not to be a British but a Soviet spy. The former professional without psyche, who is devoid of any emotional depths returns traumatized, shell shocked, and with a split personality. Fleming's last novel *The Man With the Golden Gun* takes this deconstruction of Bond even further by beginning with a brainwashed 007 returning from Russia, programmed to kill his boss M. Although the psychiatrists of MI6 will restore Bond to his former self (if there ever was one) and make him ready again for action, the reader is no longer convinced of the hero's sanity. In the words of Kingsley Amis: “Brainwashing and de-brainwashing have evidently taken their toll” (43).

Transferring neurosis

It is, of course, not by accident that such a conflicted 007 never quite found his way into the movies. Furthermore, it does not come as a surprise that the cinematic adaptations of both *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and *The Man With the Golden Gun* (1974) have virtually nothing to do with the novels of the same title. However, from that point of view, the rebooting of the Bond movie franchise with Daniel Craig as 007 seems all the more interesting, as it lets resurface the internal conflicts and

contradictions that are at the same time present and held at bay in the novels. In particular, the second to last installment of the Bond film franchise, the rather harshly criticized *Quantum of Solace* (2008) becomes all the more intriguing in comparison to the novel's neurotic undertones. Here I would claim that internal contradictions are played out more strongly and radically than ever before – although with a twist. What makes the movie so interesting is the fact that it does not so much psychologize the Bond character but, rather, that the film addresses the problem of internal psychic conflict in its very use of cinematic technique. While, in the novels, emotional distress is evaded by spurring Bond into action, in the film *Quantum of Solace*, the "abysmal psychic zones" (Antonini 162) are exposed by transposing them onto the cinematic form itself. Thus, the movie's complex visual strategies, its over-rapid editing and the often incomprehensible *mise-en-scène* so deplored by many critics are the sites where the movie succeeds in confronting what has been formerly repressed.

A sequence which may serve as both an example of and allegory for what the whole movie wants to do is when Bond, while on mission in Bolivia, contacts the MI6 headquarters in London in order to obtain information about a certain Dominic Green, the suspect he is tailing. While Bond is sitting in his car talking on his cell phone, headquarters operate the computers in the office of Bond's superior M. The glass wall enclosing M's office turns into a computer screen on whose semi-transparent surface MI6 runs through all the files containing the suspect's name, simultaneously showing stylized maps with Bond's location as well as those of other interlocutors such as agents from the CIA. As excessive as the digital graphics on the computer screen already are, things become even more complicated when, in addition to the graphics, we also see reflections on the glass as well as glimpses of what is happening in the offices behind it. As the scene progresses, we even have reverse-shots of Bond in his car in which the view through the windshield is superimposed with the imagery of the MI6 computer screen. The sequence thus turns into a contradiction in itself: Bond is asking for identification (of the villain), the movie's imagery however makes it almost impossible to identify where we are and what we see.

In blinking letters on the semi-transparent computer screen, it says "Signal Rerouting." And that is, of course, also what the images do: constantly rerouting signals and our gaze with them. Conflicting data is visually interlaced; different people and locations are mapped onto one another. Bond's portrait merges with the silhouette of his superior, and the London MI6 headquarters overlaps with the headquarters of the CIA in Langley and, eventually, with every corner of the world. Former James Bond actor Sir Roger Moore was reported to have said about the

film: “There didn’t seem to be any geography and you were wondering what the hell was going on” (Setchfield). Although this was meant as criticism, this comment actually points out the movie’s true ambition: it is precisely by superimposing different actions and geographies, different sites and sights onto each other that the movie dislocates both narrative and the characters. Even if we study the above-mentioned sequence frame by frame, we will have to admit that we cannot really tell what we are looking at. Are we seeing through the semi-transparent screen or are the people we believe to see in the background simply reflections on that very screen? What is background and what is foreground anyway? Where is our point of view and what is our focal point? Such are the questions that the image poses but refuses to answer (Figure 1).

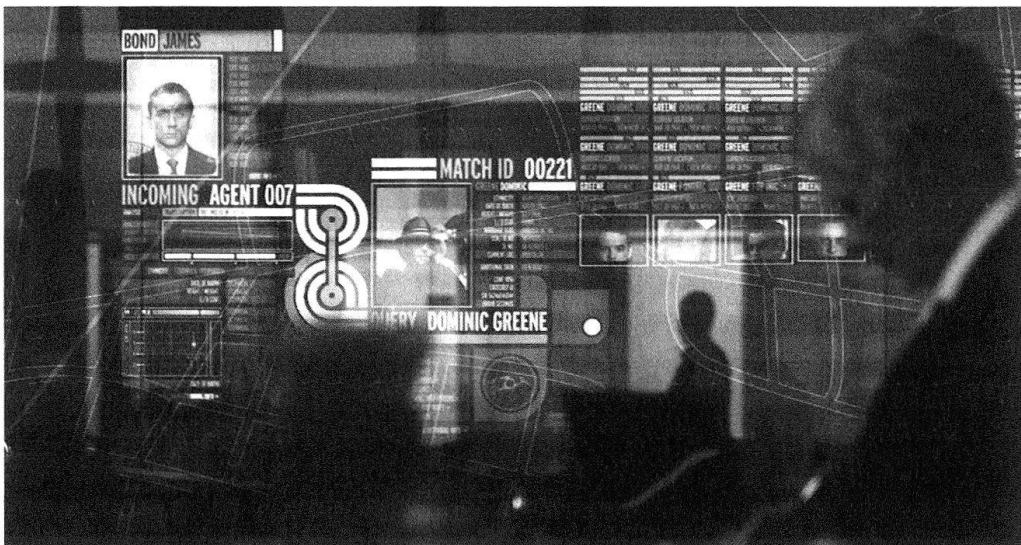


Figure 1: *Quantum of Solace* (digital frame enlargement)

Digital everywhere

What we have here is, of course, digitally enhanced cinema at its most obtrusive. The visual regime of the digital media is literally everywhere since it is present both on the level of the enunciated as well as on the level of enunciation. Not only are we shown a computer producing graphics within the diegesis, but the film itself we are watching is also obviously digitally enhanced, interlacing its analogue shots with computerized imagery. Thus, I would argue that one could read this sequence as an allegory for the digital image as such. The impossibility of deciding what is foreground and what is background and the inability to distinguish between actual presence and mere reflection, between a signal and

its re-routing, is precisely the predicament which lies at the heart of the digital image.

The pathos of analogue photography – as a theorist like Roland Barthes would define it – resides in its ability to capture what at a certain moment in time actually is in front of the photographer's lens. The seen object – such was Barthes' claim – literally engraves itself onto the photographic film (Barthes 80). “Photography” here is taken literally as a “scripture of light.” In the digital format, however, such an immediate relation between object and its representation in the medium ceases to exist. Instead, what is captured by the apparatus is translated into the digital code of ones and zeroes, thus also making obsolete the distinction between what is photographed in reality and what is created on the computer. Manipulation, which had already been considered both an asset and a danger of analogue photography, has become the all-encompassing principle in the digital age. Or as Lev Manovich puts it:

In fact, the very distinction between creation and modification, so clear in film-based media (shooting versus darkroom processes in photography, production versus post-production in cinema) no longer applies to digital cinema, since each image, regardless of its origin, goes through a number of programs before making it to the final film. (Manovich 302)

There is no outside

After all, since all the images are generated by the same code, formed out of the same pixels, this ultimately means that any image can turn into any other image by a mere re-arrangement of its components. This is in fact Gilles Deleuze's claim at the end of his second book on cinema, where he argues the following about those new electronic images of the future:

The new [digital] images no longer have any outside (out-of-field), any more than they are internalized in a whole [...] They are the object of a perpetual reorganization, in which a new image can arise from any point whatever of the preceding image. [...] And the screen itself, [...] rather constitutes a table of information, an opaque surface on which is inscribed “data.”

(Deleuze 265)

While on an analogue filmstrip every new frame literally replaces the previous one when running through the projector, in digital cinema images do not replace but rather morph into one another. In digital format, the image's frame, like the computer screen, remains the same,

while the data within this frame or on the screen is rearranged. Every new image emerges out of the previous one through a process of constant fragmentation and crystallization.

In analogue film, the impression of a moving image is an effect of our persistence of vision and the so-called *phi* phenomenon, which renders the actual gaps between the single images invisible. What is in fact a series of still photographs, rushing through the projector with a speed of 24 images per second, thus appears to our eyes as a continuous movement. In the digital format, however, it is only the individual pixel changing its color thus transforming one image into the other. While in analogue film images are (re)moved as a whole, in digital cinema it is now the “insides of the image,” so to speak, which are in continuous flux and metamorphosis. Analogue film consisted in series of separate images. In contrast to that, digital cinema seems to consist of only one image, which is constantly reshaped.

Following Deleuze, one could argue, that one finds all possible views compressed into one single view – at least virtually. The digital image always also contains its own opposite; every shot is potentially also its reverse-shot. Thus, the digital image per se is contradictory, pitted against itself as it were, pixel by pixel. In sequences such as the one described above which so heavily emphasize their digitalness, there is more at stake than a gratuitous exercise in style. In fact, visually overdetermined shots such as these are meant to direct the attention of the viewer to the complexity and the conflict that lie at the heart of the digital medium as well as in the soul of our super-agent. Once aware of this aspect of the digital as overdetermined and contradictory, one finds it repeated and rerouted throughout the movie. Even in scenes shot with analogue cameras, we find the same complex visual strategy. Although shot traditionally, the *mise-en-scène* emulates the aesthetics of the new medium. One might notice, for example, how frequently scenes are shot through glass, most notably in the sequence in which Bond overhears a meeting of the villain’s organization *Quantum* during a performance of Puccini’s opera *Tosca* at the Bregenz Festival. Time and again, the viewer is confronted with shots in which a certain view through a glass surface is interlaced with what is only a reflection on that very surface (Figure 2, [see next page](#)).

Similar to what Deleuze describes as the digital image’s ability to let “a new image [...] arise from any point whatever of the preceding image” (Deleuze 265), here we also find opposing and contradictory perspectives embedded within each other. Additionally, one might note the movie’s fascination with the breaking of glass, from an early fight sequence in which Bond and his enemy crash through the glass ceiling of an atrium in Siena to the ending when the glass-furnished lobby of a

hotel in Chile's Atacama desert is blown to pieces. This obsessively repeated imagery of breaking glass might well be read as a metaphor for the fragmentation and pixilation of the digital image.

It is indeed interesting that the last Bond movie *Skyfall* (2012) picks up on this visual strategy in a scene where Bond follows an assassin to the top of a glass tower in Shanghai. Like the character, the viewer's eye is trapped between glass walls reflecting Bond, the assassin and digital imagery of a billboard advertisement in the background. The scene seems all the more poignant since *Skyfall* is the first Bond movie shot entirely in digital format. While large parts of the movie seem eager to conceal this fact, scenes such as this one reflect – both in a literal and a metaphorical sense – the essence of the new digital medium and what it entails.



Figure 2: *Quantum of Solace* (digital frame enlargement)

From split subject to the lacking Other

What is gained by these complex visual strategies is precisely that it lets resurface an internal conflict the Bond of the novels has always tried to escape. The conflicting film image could thus be read as a displacement, as a symptom of Bond's internal conflict. Certainly, the character is more detached than ever, without psychological depth, "a blunt instrument." Yet, the split and fractured imagery enacts the (psychic) distress the character cannot face. The repressed unconscious and its traumatic messages return to the medium itself. "Trauma," meaning literally "wound," returns in the form of the pores of the digital interface, the tiny wounds of the pixels through which one image morphs from the previous one.

However, it seems that the use of the digital medium in *Quantum of Solace* entails even more. To argue that the contradictory and conflicted images of the film are to be read as allegories for the conflicted and destabilized soul of the male hero may well be considered somewhat banal or even sentimental. It seems crucial to note that by transposing internal conflict onto cinematic form, the psychic conflict is raised to a more general and abstract level. The contradictory images of *Quantum of Solace* make clear that not only the character has become ambiguous, but also actually the very situation in which he is involved has become contradictory. Not only is the hero split and traumatized, the whole world has become neurotic.

In Lacanian terms, one would describe this as a movement from the split subject (*sujet barré*) to the split big Other (*L'Autre barré*). For Lacan, the Other designates the site where language and law are constituted. The Other stands for the symbolic order which regulates the subject's conscious behavior as well as its unconscious desire. The Other is hence the matrix on which one's reality is based. It is the authority in command over the subject. However, in his paper "Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in Freudian Unconscious," Lacan argues that there is "a lack inherent in the Other's very function as the treasure trove of signifiers" (693). Not only is the subject marked, traumatized and traversed by unacknowledged desires, but the whole symbolic universe is in fact ill-grounded and inconsistent: "the most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies [...] in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack" (Zizek 122).

Far from presenting a perfect illusion, which glosses over all contradictions and replaces reality with a perfect simulacrum which digital imaging is so often accused of, the digital medium points to precisely this. By representing, by re-routing reality in contradictory images, digital cinema shows nothing other than the traumatic lack behind reality, the inadequacy of any conception of the symbolic order and its representative the big Other understood as coherent and in command. The digital image may no longer be realistic, but it is all the more truthful for hinting at the disconcerting Real hidden behind the screen of reality. This transference of psychic trauma onto the technical apparatus may also be seen in the way 007 uses his equipment. Bond's beloved gadgets threaten to turn against their owner.

Dysfunctional gadgets

In his reincarnation as Bond at the turn of the millennium, Pierce Brosnan was still able to master the new technologies. In order to fight the techno-terrorist of the future, he simply became the most ingenious of them all, setting off bombs as well as steering his BMW via remote control. By relying on gadgetry more than ever before, he presented himself as the ultimate hero for the digital age and tried to convince us that anything is possible with new and better electronic equipment. The absurdity to which such a faith in technology will lead can be seen in the inane *Die Another Day* when Bond is provided with an invisible car. In *Quantum of Solace*, however, all the gadgetry defeats its purpose. Not only is Bond no longer in control of the machines, but even the big Other, who is calling the shots, does not know what he is doing. Similar to what Garrett Stewart has argued so compellingly in regard to recent American war movies, digital imaging no longer provides the cool look from a distance it once was so fetishized for. The “psychic defense mechanism” (Stewart 47) implemented in the new technologies begins to stutter. This way, not only does a subjective suffering come into view again, but rather a dysfunction on a much grander scale becomes obvious.

It is this radical move from the subject’s trauma to a punctured symbolic universe which makes *Quantum of Solace* both a consistent and transgressive adaption of the Bond novels. While in the Fleming books the agent is able to escape from his contradictory self into the cold-war conflict with its clear-cut oppositions, *Quantum of Solace* takes places in a world where such lines of demarcation – distinguishing neatly between the good and the bad – have ceased to exist. Although we still have Dominic Greene, the prototypical villain, with whom we are so familiar from earlier Bond movies, he, too, eventually turns out to be only one minor representative of a global cooperation in which all political parties, dictatorships as well as western democracies are involved. The enemy Bond is fighting against turns out to be part and parcel of the very same system he claims to defend.

In his intriguing reading of the 2006 movie *Casino Royale*, Jason Sperb has shown how this film circles constantly around the metaphor of “the big picture,” that larger purpose which “drives” both Bond and the narrative (Sperb 64). Yet, although all the characters keep mentioning the big picture, it is never completely revealed, probably because the ultimate purpose for Bond’s fight has become as elusive and shifting as the evil he is fighting against (Sperb 63). It might be that evil is so difficult to track because it cannot really be distinguished from its opposite. In that regard, it is all the more interesting that near the end of the novel *Casino Royale* a Russian agent carves his signature – an “inverted

M” – into Bonds hand (Fleming, *Casino Royale* 121). It is as if to insinuate that the enemy is nothing more than the mere double, the inverted mirror image of Bond’s boss M. The Bond universe with its abbreviations has always been a perfect illustration of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic order with M standing for the Master Signifier, representing nothing else than ultimately the big Other himself on whose orders 007 goes into battle. If Bond’s enemy Le Chiffre turns out to be really nothing more than what his name says – a cipher without meaning and completely replaceable – M is also an empty sign. The big Other is lacking and there is no master who anchors the symbolic order, granting its authority. “I have no guarantee of any kind that this Other [...] can give me [...] truth. There is no [...] Other of the Other” (Lacan 1959). Nor is M the stern but loving mother, as the sentimental ending of *Skyfall* wants to have it. In fact, M is just another name for the gaping hole at the heart of the symbolic order both camouflaging and signaling its inconsistency.

This deconstruction of the symbolic order is already hinted at in the movie *Casino Royale* whose obsession with gaps and ellipses makes it ultimately “a film about incompleteness” (Sperb 53). *Quantum of Solace*, however, makes this deconstruction complete. Not only does the film begin at exactly the point where *Casino Royale* left off, thus turning the movie into a direct sequel of the previous one, but also on a more abstract level, the second movie wants to explore what has been left unseen in the first one. In *Casino Royale* the big picture, which, as Sperb puts it, “sits just beyond the narrative,” is finally encountered but only to discover its deficiency. The big picture, like the Lacanian big Other, turns out to be far too contradictory to offer any stable frame of reference since it mixes and interlaces what was once considered to be incompatible. Hence, even Bond’s final, utterly cruel victory over Dominic Greene does not change a thing about the big picture of which both villain and secret agent are only tiny pixels. As the digital image recomposes as quickly as it falls apart, so too will the global network called “The Quantum Group,” formed out of politicians and assassins, of economy and contraband, democratic leaders and ruthless dictators, continue to exist. Ironically, the death of the villain Dominic Green is the ultimate proof that nothing has really changed, as it is his own organization that executes him. Like single pixels switching their color, the now vacant positions within the big picture will simply be filled with new personnel.

It is not that there are no conflicts any more; on the contrary, conflict is everywhere. There are no longer different political systems opposing each other, but there is only one big system, the big Other, which is pitted against itself. Thus, even the very last shot of the film becomes

an ironic statement. After having hunted down those who forced Vesper Lynd, his lover from *Casino Royale*, to commit suicide, Bond is finally able to return to duty. In the last exchange of dialogue, M says to Bond, "I need you back," and he answers, "I never left." As if to prove his professionalism, he drops the deceased Vesper's necklace into the snow. As a visual equivalent to Fleming's line "The bitch is dead," this gesture is meant to be read as Bond finally overcoming all the painful emotional attachments of the past. Traumatic loss is simply shrugged off, literally dropped. Once again, Bond escapes into action and reverts to being a successful "blunt instrument" - unhindered by any twitch of neurosis. Yet, the escape is futile, and the final image tells us so (Figure 3). In the close up of the snow with its tiny crystals of ice, we find the fractured and pixilated visuals of the new media once again, re-routed. What we see is nothing other than digital noise, commonly referred to as "snow." Bond dodges internal psychic conflict only to be engulfed by an even more conflicted war zone. His escape from personal neurosis has led him right into the neurosis of the world.

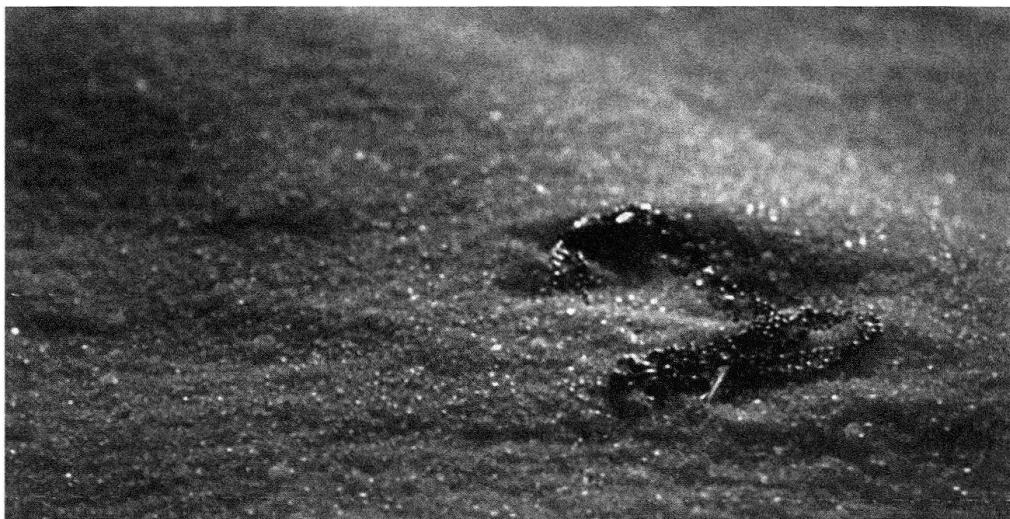


Figure 3: *Quantum of Solace* (digital frame enlargement)

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