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| **Feature Article** | | | |
| **Chris Jackson is an Associate Professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She teaches writing, literature, and music history.**            **"**  Films still portray geopolitical clashes in **personal terms**, but in the ‘forties films, love was the driving force, and institutionalized justice worked. In today’s cineplex, **money and technology** define power.  **"**                      **"**  By contrast, *M:i-2*’s Nyah lacks the **moral faculty** to make a choice. She merely reacts..    **"** |  |  | ***Mission: Impossible 2:*** Ethics of World Domination  By Chris Jackson       It’s *d�j� vu* all over again! Nearly everything in this summer’s blockbuster, John Woo’s action-packed *M:i-2*, looks derivative. Tom Cruise is spread-eagled Christ-like against a red rock cliff-face. Cruise wears *Terminator*-style sunglasses while zooming on a motorcycle. Cruise wrestles his adversary in a *Matrix*-esque midair ballet. As the story unfolds, another similarity clicks into place. Story elements from *M:i-2* first appeared onscreen in Hitchcock’s *Notorious* (1946*)*. How have film versions of world domination, and the role of justice in preventing it, changed over fifty-four years?     Robert Towne’s screenplay for *M:i-2* uses Hitchcock’s highly polished film as a template. John Woo has said in an interview that he wanted his film to have a romanticism similar to *Notorious* (Longsdorf, "Straight from the Source," <http://miami.citysearch.com/E/F/MIAFL/0000/02/95/4.html)>. Romanticism, no, but plot, yes. Good Guy Spy Agency enlists help fighting Absolute Evil from a Woman with a Shady Past. Call it the Mata Hari motif.     In *Notorious*, Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) is the party-hearty daughter of a Nazi sympathizer jailed for treason. *M:i-2* shows us Nyah Nordoff-Hall (Thandie Newton), an international thief wanted by Interpol. After a high-speed car sequence, the Good Side (Cary Grant/Tom Cruise) recruits our Good Bad-Girl. The Good Side wears her down with fast machines and a touch of blackmail. Make up for your father’s treachery. Erase your criminal slate. The mission she must accept? Gain access to the House of Former Paramour Bad Guy (Claude Rains/Dougray Scott), and remember the names of all visitors. If you have to use your body, we won’t object.     With a horse race as a cover, Intrepid Girl Spy passes information to Good Guy. A racetrack is a practical spot for the drop as Our Girl can get lost in the crowd. The horserace is also emblematic of the narrative, as the two sides jockey for position. Call this segment Picking a Winner.     The Good Guy Spy Agency presses our by-now proficient Woman Spy toward ever more risky missions, including the temporary theft of an item leading to crucial information. *Notorious* presents Ingrid Bergman’s famous *legerdemain* with the key to Sebastian’s wine cellar. At least she has a few hours to return the key. In *M:i-2*, Nyah has to pick the villain’s pocket and return the envelope in a few minutes while still at the racetrack. Good races against Bad, while Girl races against the clock to save her own life.     Both films even present lessons in Cigar Cutter Sadism 101. The scene in *Notorious* is chilling in its subtlety. Watch that film again to see Claude Rains clipping his cigar while slowly killing Ingrid Bergman by inches and calling her "my dear." Subtlety is hardly *M:i-2*’s strong suit. Who can forget the scene in which Bad Guy Ambrose uses the cutter to demand absolute loyalty from his henchman?     Because our Mata Hari is the questing character, audiences identify with her moral universe. While undercover, her fraudulent identity is ethically questionable. As LeCarre novels point out, the undercover agent lives in a moral twilight where, to halt world domination, anything goes.     No less reprehensible are the ethics of the controllers of the woman agent, organizations we assume to be like the Central Intelligence Agency or FBI. They make it necessary for the spy to sleep with the enemy, yet they condemn her for it. "A woman like that." In *Notorious*, Alicia Huberman shrugs off the criticism. In the ‘forties films, individuals sacrificed personal morality to a higher cause. Nyah seems oblivious to being used. Her higher cause is to restart her criminal career with a clean slate.     Time was, love was more powerful than money, at least onscreen. In *Notorious*, Alicia picks witty, penniless Devlin over that loaded toad Sebastian. When Alicia says, "I’m allergic to American agents," it’s only because Dev is giving her pain. It’s a testimony to Claude Rains’ wonderful acting that Sebastian, forty-plus at least, exudes a boyish charm. "Forgive me, my dear, for acting like a jealous schoolboy." In fact, all the Nazis at Sebastian’s house are well-mannered heel-clickers, Arendt’s banal evil incarnate. Studying Hitchcock’s work, we *almost* understand this evil because we see its underpinnings. Sebastian’s money and eagerness to please are his chief credentials for admission to the Nazi hierarchy.     By contrast, *M:i-2*’s Nyah lacks the moral faculty to make a choice. She merely reacts. She helps Ethan Hunt because—well, because. Her bathtub love scene with Ethan seems to take place in a coffin. Hunt’s adversary, Sean Ambrose, is a thug, but he registers more delight in Nyah than does Hunt. When Ambrose morphs into Hunt, with a little help from the trademark MI disguise kit, Nyah fails to notice the difference. Romance for her is clearly a case of "love the one you’re with." Several times, Ambrose wears the same clothes as Hunt. Woo explores a similar motif in *Face/Off* (1997). Hero and villain are flip sides of the same coin.     In each film, the Bad Guy initially believes the Good Bad-Girl’s sincerity, but small mistakes tip them off. She is not what she seems. Once clued into Alicia’s perfidy, villains Sebastian and Mom begin their poison campaign. The evil coffee sits in a cup next to Alicia when she realizes their conspiracy. Hitchcock has shot and edited this scene so the cup appears to dwarf Ingrid Berman’s face.     Similarly, Nyah ends up poisoned. The horrid virus is contained in a gun-shaped vial. Unlike Bergman, who is an unwilling victim, Nyah injects herself with the virus. A brilliant, self-sacrificing move to save the world? She explains her action to Tom Cruise’s character, Ethan Hunt: "I wasn’t thinking . . . I did it to save you." The guys use guns to fight each other. Nyah shoots herself. D-uh. We can tag this segment "Martyr Hari."     While not a strict remake*, M:i-2* is more than loosely based on Hitchcock’s classic. With its mysterious closed doors, dialogue by Ben Hecht, and marvelous pairing of Grant and Bergman, *Notorious* is by far the better film. Sure, John Woo’s motorcycle scenes and acrobatic fights are technically amazing to watch, but they are all slick, metallic surface. Qualitative judgments aside, what does this comparison add up to?     Over fifty years, so much about films has changed, special effects, directors’ sensibilities, audience expectations, that we draw conclusions at our peril. But given that, here are some thoughts. We have seen the Good and the Bad. You know what comes next.     Attempts to rule the world continue unabated, onscreen and off. Films still portray geopolitical clashes in personal terms, but in the ‘forties films, love was the driving force, and institutionalized justice worked. In today’s cineplex, money and technology define power. Onscreen justice is uneven at best, more often jagged and fragmented by personal vengeance.     The ending of *Notorious* presents a resolution in human terms of courage and risk. Dev storms the castle to rescue Alicia. Sebastian walks alongside, helpless to save himself. Mama talks as much as she can, but she is desperate. "Talk to them, Alex." She knows that Sebastian’s mistake means he will be thrown to the Nazi wolves. The Evil ones will kill each other off, that is to say, self-destruct. Dev and Alicia ride away, but Justice prevails. Personal heroism leads to an effective, institutional solution to evil. Nazi crimes were punished, both in reality and onscreen via *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961).     In Woo’s final scenes, everyone self-destructs, along with due process. Greed subverts even the scientist’s once noble impulse to cure disease. Geopolitical conquest by virus has had screen outbreaks before, but *M:i-2* carries a new twist. Bad Guy Ambrose demands his payoff in stock options. The Villains complete the transaction via laptop. The scene gives more than a nod to the Internet’s role in world domination.     Good Guy and Bad Guy go head to head. They wear identical black outfits. Ethan initially decides to spare the life of his alterego, but events change his mind. "You should have killed me," Ambrose tells Ethan, who then complies. The Virtuous One’s hands are as dirty with vengeance as the Bad Guy’s are with greed. It’s hard to find a toehold for justice anywhere in this haze of moral ambiguity.     Does this onscreen statement reflect what’s going on in real world power consolidations? How effective is international law in restraining, for example, individuals bent on starting a worldwide biological disaster? What countermeasures do our military organizations have against germ warfare? There is no global consensus on how to deal with terrorism. Despite the ongoing Lockerbie trial, few terrorists are brought to justice. Human rights organizations have had no lasting success reining in erratic leaders like Hussein or Milosevic. Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe continues his campaign of "land re-distribution," by seizing farms owned by whites.     As for the dominating Internet, the judicial system has issued a ruling against Microsoft, but Gates vows to appeal. For how long will the ruling stand?  *M:i-2* makes no reference to Nyah being biracial, but I think this is a key part of her significance. Born in Zambia, Newton is less exotic Bond heroine and more na�ve aborigine. In closing scenes, Hunt and Ambrose fight in midair, while Nyah, Toxic Spy, wanders like a lost child. The disease gathers to disintegrate her blood cells. Standing on the edge of a cliff, she contemplates suicide.     Superpowers battle while Third World countries draw closer to disaster. Affluent countries impress each other with economic influence, hardware, and battle pyrotechnics, while ignoring the human costs of geopolitical conflict. A heavy moral to load onto an essentially escapist movie? Perhaps. But it doesn’t hurt to think about it.  *Posted July 1, 2000*  **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments)     |  | | --- | | **Other Comments by  Chris Jackson**   * [**The Winslow Boy - Chris Jackson**](http://docs.google.com/winslow-jackson.htm) * [**Providence and Homicide - Chris Jackson**](http://docs.google.com/providence-jackson.htm) * [**Ally McBeal - Chris Jackson**](http://docs.google.com/ally-music.htm) | |  | |  | |  | |  | |
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