

# LICENCE TO KILL

Directed by John Glen  
Produced by Albert R. Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson  
Distributed by United Artists  
Released in 1989

A protagonist is only as strong as his antagonist. The antagonist of *Licence to Kill*, Franz Sanchez, is the best Bond villain ever. Yes, he's even better than Goldfinger. Goldfinger poses little physical threat to James Bond. Moreover, Goldfinger is only motivated by greed; but for Sanchez loyalty is more important than money. Also, Sanchez is a believable villain—his goals are outsized but obtainable. However, his weapons (fear and stinger missiles) are a tad more prosaic than Goldfinger's (what with his derby-flinging manservant and secondhand nuclear bomb).

For those who like their Bonds a bit more fantastic, the gritty believability of *Licence to Kill* is a disappointment. To see Bond defeat the villain is always gratifying, but to know that a dozen more just like him flourish in the real world outside the theater can be discouraging. Compared to the other Bond films, *Licence to Kill* is the antithesis of escapism. It plays more like a hyperbolic documentary. Every government from the United States down to Argentina is paralyzed by Sanchez. The cost of defeating him is judged excessive. Bond, one of the world's most capable men, is enjoined not to take on this task, partly because of the danger, but mainly because it's just not legal. But with his best friend Felix Leiter butchered by a shark and Felix's bride raped and murdered on their wedding night, Bond is consumed by rage and decides to use his extraordinary skills for a cause he *knows* is right, as opposed to one he is *told* is just.

Sanchez, though he may be a keen tactician, is totally blind to Bond. He takes no heed of revenge on the part of Felix's allies, perhaps thinking they'd all be constrained by the law, or could be bought off like Ed Killifer. He even has his security chief run an extensive check on Bond, managing merely to examine his professional background, not personal. The results show that Bond quit being a Double-O, so he must be a bad guy like them! (How the \$5 million which Bond deposits in the Banco de Isthmus ties into his cover story of being a hired gun looking for work is not explored by the compelling, but fractured, screenplay.)

To Sanchez, Bond is simply a rogue with no scruples who evinces a gratifying desire to please and a sense of style lacking in his lackeys. He will be whatever Sanchez wants him to become. Not so. Bond's actually the greatest of the good guys (not in the moral sense, but from a perspective of power). Sanchez makes the fatal mistake of thinking that there is no one more cunning than he.

Our villain has no idea Bond is his enemy until he sets fire to the lab. Even then he only has Dario's mistaken belief of Bond-as-informer to work with. Sanchez doesn't even begin to understand until Bond acquaints Sanchez with the lighter inscribed by Della and Felix. Bond had ingratiated himself with Sanchez, flattering him and feeding him a mixture of legitimate and spurious intelligence on the enemies lurking within the '100% loyal' Sanchez hierarchy. Just as he was beginning to question his assumptions about his hirelings he welcomes into his

fold a man who can barely restrain himself from strangling Sanchez whenever he's forced to commiserate with him.

It begs the question of what Bond's plan is anyway. He kills him, in the end. That's straightforward enough. But this occurs after Bond has been exposed and he can no longer chip away at Sanchez's operation. His first plan was to assassinate him from a distance, and therefore escape detection. After Pam laments the security upgrade Sanchez has ordered and says they won't get another shot at him, Bond replies, "we don't have to." Perhaps he's thinking that he can arrange for one of Sanchez's underlings to kill him somehow. It's not clear. Bond often seems to be nursing an inconsolable rage. Notice how he risks his safety to unnecessarily knife and chuck the cocaine heading back to the WAVEKREST. Even after Sentinel (the remotely-controlled sub) surfaces, Bond is still tossing coke overboard, exposing his position. He does a similar thing near the end of the film when he opens the valve on the back of the tanker to let the cocaine-laden gasoline splatter on the road. Basically, Bond isn't just mad at Sanchez but at the drugs that have given him his power. It would be more practical to just be mad at Sanchez. Indeed, some enemies of Sanchez aren't mad enough. The Hong Kong agent working undercover for Her Majesty is upset at Bond for trying to kill Sanchez. The agent thinks Sanchez won't reveal any more of his operation. But isn't killing Sanchez more to the point, anyway? Is Kwang really concerned about Sanchez's operation or is he just protecting the work he's been doing, forgetting the big picture, just as M has forgotten how important loyalty and sacrifice are, in the matter of Felix Leiter?

Without M, Bond is working on his own. But he's not alone. Aply assisting our hero in his fight against Sanchez are Pam Bouvier and Lupe Lamora. Both women despise Sanchez and learn to love James Bond. He, for the first time in a Bond film, has to choose between two ladies at the film's conclusion! Pam is tough and very prickly about any aspersions cast on her supposed lack of strength (though it's hard to imagine someone as beautiful as her ever wanting to fly "to the toughest hell holes in South America"). Why not just marry an investment banker and take it easy?

Lupe is a more interesting character. She is a captive of Sanchez. But as long as she demonstrates nominal loyalty to him, he treats her with kindness and respect. Yet she cannot help making half-hearted attempts to escape, running away for weekends as demonstrated in the pre-title sequence. She harbors a thorough contempt for the jovial depravity of the male sex. She's sick of their ugly games. Consider her disgust with Krest when he tries to seduce her on the WAVEKREST, her revulsion when she sees Sharky strung up like a piece of meat, and how she leaves Sanchez's office when Bond (playing up his hired gun shtick) trivializes murder amongst Sanchez and his men. She just wants to get out of this mess of a life she is living. For her James Bond is a white knight who is riding to her rescue. Perhaps she really does love him, and not just the idea of him.

But Bond can't pick them both. So Lupe is the one to be disappointed. At the film's conclusion, Lupe hosts a party at Sanchez's house. He'd dead, and everyone is honoring the drug lord's memory by reveling in his demise at his house, probably toasting his death with his own champagne! Since Bond refers to Lupe as the hostess, it may be her place now. We do see that she has taken as her own the diamond bracelet that once adorned Sanchez's pet iguana (and which she despised, not just because of its ugliness but because the lizard sported that

symbol of beauty and favor that by rights belonged to her). Bond could marry Lupe and live at that incredible house the rest of his life. He is no longer part of Her Majesty's Secret Service. Perhaps he could assume control of Sanchez's empire and make his own play for world domination.

That's not his way. James Bond is a man of commendable discipline, offering his life for his country with each new mission. He'll return to the Double-O section, serving there until he's too old or already dead.

Is that why he chooses Pam? Is it because he doesn't think she loves him like Lupe does? And since he's going to leave whichever girl he picks, perhaps he thinks Pam will take it better? They're both really enamored with Bond, and though Lupe isn't as demonstratively tough as Pam is, Lupe has probably led a more difficult life. Each has had sex with Bond just once, and in both instances the woman was the aggressor. Both first met Bond only briefly, their next encounter being unexpected and in situations of great stress and peril. Bond uses both to get to Sanchez (Lupe takes Bond upstairs at the casino; Pam uses her flying skills and familiarity with Sanchez's operation to bring him into Isthmus City undetected). Both help kill Sanchez's underlings (Pam shoots Dario; Lupe refuses to defend Krest and lets Sanchez murder him). Pam, on a bed, is threatened with a gun; Lupe, on a bed, is threatened with a knife. Immediately after both incidents, each girl rebukes Bond for his ignorance about Sanchez's character and plans.

Both are not safe until Sanchez is dead.

And lucky for them, that's all Bond wants. Indeed, *Licence to Kill* sports the greatest title of any Bond film. It's not as mysterious or poetic as 'You Only Live Twice' or 'The World Is Not Enough,' but it hits the nail squarely on the head. Bond has always killed because of orders. But there is a higher law than that which governs men. Bond feels he is uniquely placed and obligated to kill Sanchez because of Sanchez's crimes against his friends. Bond is very likely wrong about his convictions. Murder is still murder. But, strangely enough, Bond is more justified in this killing (or, more specifically in his quest to kill) than he is on an authorized mission.

Why is it when a government says killing is o.k. that the stigma is removed? Is it because only with a government (think war and capital punishment) can there be dispassion and collective judgment? M totally failed by denying Bond the implicit authorization to hunt down Sanchez. Yes, the vagaries of jurisdiction, treaty, and international law do not allow it. But killing for a moral reason, even if it's just revenge, must be more morally sound than killing merely because it satisfies a government's strategic aims in the endless quest for position and power.

Bond is known to have a license to kill—whom he chooses, when he chooses. Thus, he has the discretion, when on the job, to kill those he sees fit to be eliminated. He is, in effect, given the power of judge, jury, and executioner.

He is stripped of his license to kill by M. But the real license cannot be taken away. So the movie is really about Bond, having lost his man-given power, falling back on his God-given power to kill. This is the Bond film where we see how Bond resolves to utilize, and apply, this power.

We saw hints of this in the preceding Bond film, *The Living Daylights*. There Bond refused to kill a sniper since he had a sneaking suspicion that she was merely a plant, and not an assassin. Also, she was very beautiful. Later in the film, M orders Bond to execute Soviet General Pushkin, a man Bond holds in grudging esteem. Bond bristles when M says he'll give the job to 008. Bond replies, "If it has to be done, I'd rather do it." Despite his doubts, Bond comes close to killing Pushkin, but finally decides that the man may be innocent and that by faking his death the real villain will be exposed.

Thus, we see that even when Bond is ordered to kill, he will be the final arbiter. So when kill he does, he kills on no one's authority but his own. But that's enough for him. And it's probably enough for us, too.