

Serialize This: The Universification of Film Franchises has Backed Hollywood into a Corner

Part Two: How Did This Mission Get So Impossible?

By Danny Katz

Mission: Impossible began its Hollywood lifecycle as a TV show that I cannot be one hundred percent certain actually existed (OK...[maybe I can](#)). Behind the scenes tellings of that first feature installment, directed by none other than *Brian Fucking De Palma*, sound like the origin story of a movie that imploded on liftoff, not a [\\$450 million dollar](#) franchise launchpad. Two of the industry's greatest writers, from two different generations of Hollywood, with two staunchly differing sensibilities, found themselves working on two different scripts for the same movie. And...also, sometimes the [same script](#)? It shouldn't have worked. But if you know anything about *Brian Fucking De Palma*—or frankly [many of his](#) contemporaries—these sorts of tumultuous film productions were par for the course. And somehow, they often spelled major hits.

Mission: Impossible is electric. It's all haunting dutch angles, delightfully convoluted double crosses, and shadowy misdirection between a series of taut, escalating set pieces. When one considers the volatile dark arts it took to create such an inspired final product, it's not so surprising that Cruise and company would take two more installments before truly coming close to replicating that alchemy.

Mission: Impossible II makes for an abrasive viewing experience. It sort of plays like an in-universe *Entourage* movie that might star [Vincent Chase](#). The sound track is dialed up way too loud. The editing is so far up its own ass, Tony Scott would have scoffed at it. And every line of dialogue uttered leaves one wondering what stage of addiction Robert Towne was battling when he wrote the screenplay. But at least choices were made. That's more than can be said for *Mission: Impossible III*, which is famous for every movie-guy you know reminding you how awesome the Philip Seymour Hoffman performance was. And yeah, your movie-guy friend is right. PSH was fucking great, he was always fucking great. But *man* what a bland film.

Directed by JJ Abrams fresh off the two-part pilot of *Lost*, *Mission III* marked the former wunderkind and Hollywood script doctor's directorial debut in the feature world. With a career and [filmography easily worth its own extended investigatorial series](#), Cruise apparently settled on JJ as the man to steer Ethan Hunt's ship after meeting him on set of *War of the Worlds* and then [binge-watching the first season of Alias](#). A fatal flaw was made in this third installment that would go on to infect the rest of the series—the introduction of Hunt's wife. Michelle Monaghan does a solid enough job in a mostly thankless role, but holy shit did these guys overestimate how much anyone would care about the home life of the IMF's most legendary asset. Hunt could have been the American James Bond, but instead, seeds were sown that would eventually grow into a *Fast & Furious*-level infatuation with Family ([in Hunt's case, the Team](#)).

Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol breathed new life into the franchise. All it took was the [motherfucking director of *The Incredibles*](#) and a little of that alchemy that made the series first installment such a confusing, glorious mess. Brad Bird, in attempting to make his live action feature directorial debut, was drawn to the spy series for its lack of “[house style](#),” confident in his ability to leave an imprint of authorship. His efforts, combined with stewardship from Cruise and JJ Abrams—now onboard in a producer role—resulted in the most important film in the franchise, one that raised the quality of storytelling and onscreen technical wizardry to at least as high as the De Palma entry, and also designed a blue print for the rest of the series.

MI4 is a *movie* movie. It looks gorgeous—shot by Robert Elswit. It’s full of pulpy touches like a seductress hit-woman who gets paid in diamonds. Simon Pegg is at his funniest. And the deployment of made-up spy-tech is easily the series best. The opening prison break. The Kremlin stuff. The Fucking Burj Khalifa! *MI4* is a *movie* movie.

If the *Mission: Impossible* series was reborn with *Ghost Protocol*, it was at its absolute best across the two-movie run of *Rogue Nation* and *Fall Out*. Christopher McQuarrie, who came on board *MI4*’s production to rework an overly convoluted script (part of that glorious aforementioned alchemy) had cemented himself as the only man in Hollywood that Tom Cruise would trust. He took the reins as director for the rest of the films in the franchise, a chess move that looked promising through *MI6*, but also meant goodbye to that lack of house style that made the series so creatively unpredictable. With every subsequent entry that McQuarrie shepherded, the *Mission: Impossible* films became increasingly sentimental. In other words, the franchise lore began to wriggle further and further up its own ass.

The film formerly known as [Dead Reckoning Part 1](#) was a tonally off balance chapter of the series. With set pieces that seemed to hit or miss their adrenaline-junky marks at a 50/50 clip—the motorcycle jump scene in particular failing to provide even a fraction of the juice that the previous installment’s Halo Jump provided—and a plot that made considerably more sense if viewers read a franchise dossier before ~~it self destructs~~ viewing, Cruise and Co. can be forgiven for taking a half step back in quality while [setting a standard for film productions operating during the COVID pandemic](#).

After the (relative) underperformance of *Part 1* at the box office, it was declared there would be no *Part 2*. *The Final Reckoning* faced its [own production delays](#)—this time due to the writer’s strike. It only makes sense that a film franchise which supposedly caught its stride building set pieces [before scripts were written](#) would eventually fall apart like a third-world theme park built outside the concept of safety codes. *The Final Reckoning* is an absolute mess from start to finish. It’s a hard three hours, with two exceptional stunt sequences that are easily as good (maybe the very best) as the series has ever produced. There’s just so much...else. Why are there so many flashbacks to things we just saw in *this* movie? Every time someone utters the word “poison pill” we cut to Benji hot gluing microchips and shit. It’s as if the filmmakers knew we would forget what that little doohickey-macguffin was, which...fair? And there was just so much talking. Characters were either verbally beating the audience over the head with the notion that Ethan is White Jesus or vomiting exposition dump after exposition dump. For a film that spent so much of its

considerable run time explaining what was going on, I'd be utterly shocked to learn that anyone who watched this movie could actually explain what it meant when that tiny little box in Hayley Atwell's hand started glowing at the end.

And the universification here just compounded the film's problems. It turns out that (spoiler alert) a character who's been chasing Ethan like a dog with a bone has a vendetta built around the fact that his late father was a key character in the very first *Mission Impossible* installment. This realization adds absolutely nothing to the viewing experience. At some point, someone explains that this movie's macguffin is directly tied to the third movie's macguffin. This too adds absolutely nothing to the viewing experience. A role player from that first Brian De Palma-helmed movie shows up in this one too (and actually has a lot more dialogue in *The Final Reckoning*) and while his character and storyline are far from the worst element of this movie, HE ALSO SPEAKS TO ETHAN HUNT LIKE HE'S WHITE JESUS. Seriously, what is that? When did that happen? How did we get here? Am I dangerously dehydrated after that three-hour runtime?

The absence of gun shot and stab wounds make for the distinct feeling of a thriller with its edges sanded off. That, plus the mankind-verses-entity of it all pushes this installment further into the superhero genre and about as far away from its spy roots as it's ever been. I'm not sure that anyone actually spies on anyone in this movie. That said, the zero gravity dueling airplane stuff as well as Cruise's solo antics in the submarine are certainly worth the price of admission.

I just don't know that this one-upsmanship can continue much longer. Perhaps after a short reprieve, the *Mission: Impossible* franchise can rediscover its heritage as a story-driven showcase for auteur directors. What might Steven Soderbergh do behind the camera on one of these things? What about The [Daniels](#)? What would a Quentin Tarantino script find the Impossible Mission Force up to in a post-Ethan Hunt world? If it feels like that's something we will never ever find out, let me remind you that Luka Doncic was traded to the Lakers just two months before [Netflix bought a QT script for David Fincher to direct](#). We're in uncharted waters here. We might be living in an alternate timeline. ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN.

I need some water.