

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE II

Directed by John Woo
Produced by Tom Cruise and Paula Wagner
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 2000

Entertainment need not be inane. *Mission: Impossible II* might rank as one of the most expensive slapdash efforts in film lore. It's not the special effects or production design that seem cheap and rushed—it's the story, which is convoluted, derivative, and inexplicable. This movie takes shortcuts on storytelling and hopes to score with bravado and glamour.

First of all, Tom Cruise and Thandie Newton are, each, very good—they look good, their acting is effective but not flashy, and they move gracefully. The rest of the characters (with one exception) are ciphers. Much care is given to Dougray Scott's Sean Ambrose in a futile attempt to make him wounded, cruel, and angry. The cigar-cutter scene is the most obvious example. But why should we be impressed with a villain who, on the most elemental perceived slight (his second-in-command questioning the motivations of retuning lover Newton), will sadistically threaten and injure his very loyal servant? Instead of seeming formidable, the villain comes across as weak, since he can't handle uncomplimentary suggestions that are ultimately designed to protect him!

But story flaws go way beyond character development. Why would Ethan Hunt anticipate that Ambrose would scour the world for news of an impending law enforcement move against him, only to discover that Nyah was locked up in the process? And, if he were to find her, why would Hunt expect Sean to bail her out? She left *him*, so wouldn't Sean think, *Good riddance; I'll let you rot in there?* And why does Sean expect Nyah to spread the virus around Sydney just by depositing her in the city's center? Does he think she'll go around spitting on people?

The racetrack sequence is one of the picture's few intelligent highlights. But this rare example of sustained tension and intrigue merely amplifies the movie's blatant appropriation of themes and situations from Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946).

The movie just gets worse as it goes along. The climactic fight begins with two very intelligent men deciding to jump off their respective motorcycles at 40-plus miles-per-hour and crash into each other. That move, if it didn't kill them both, should have seriously wounded them. Their fight seems to last forever and is only of interest for the absurdity of a mortal struggle reduced to a ballet of fisticuffs. Character motivation is long lost by this point.

The film's climax is truly bizarre. Sean is proved to be conscious after all. And Ethan is unarmed. But Sean keeps talking rather than just killing his lethal enemy. Ethan, thinking on his feet, stomps the sand so his buried handgun will spring up, allowing him to grab, spin, and shoot. Somehow Sean misses, but Ethan does not.

Oddly enough, *Mission: Impossible II*, for all its inanities, is still salvageable at this point. The entire movie could be redeemed if, after Hunt turns back to the helicopter, he discovers that Nyah (who was waiting for the antidote that Hunt had pilfered) has been shot between the eyes by Sean, and is dead. Remember, she moved into a position right by the chopper door to watch

the fight, and Sean's bullet missed. But the chopper is right behind Hunt! The bullet has to hit something.

So have it kill *her*.

Sean wants her dead, anyway.

All of Hunt's adventures would be proven futile, and his annoying insouciance would be pierced like a putrid boil. Then, in the following scene, we could watch Hunt have it out with the Director (Anthony Hopkins, easily the best thing in the movie), with Hunt raging that she should never have been brought into this, and why do half your agents end up as traitors and all of that. And the movie could end with the implication that Hunt would be avenged, or he might lose his charm, or something equally dire. The superfluity of masks and slow-motion beauty shots would be forgiven!

And *then*, when it came time for *Mission: Impossible III*, we would have a better idea why Hunt decided to instruct rather than keep serving in the field, and we'd really believe he is serious about Jules. After all, he was serious about Nyah. But she's long forgotten by *Mission: Impossible III*, along with (mercifully) the rest of *Mission: Impossible II*.