

**THE IMPOSSIBLE, SERIOUSLY:  
ON DE PALMA'S *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE*  
BY NICOLE BRENEZ**

Exploits that are superhuman, incredible or just plain unbelievable constitute the order of the day in action cinema. But what about the impossible?

"'The thing represented is impossible'. That is indeed a fault, but it is justified if doing so achieves the artistic purpose - this has already been stated: if doing so makes this or some other part of the poem more exciting". (1)

So, from the outset, the impossible is allowed.

Amazing: To blow up a character (Kittridge/Henry Czerny, the chief of the Impossible Mission Force) and have him return intact several sequences later.

Unexpected: To bring a couple of functional characters (Krieger/Jean Reno, Luther/Ving Rhames) together, and then violently sort them, within the fiction, into bad (Krieger) and good (Luther).

Impractical: To re-read a sequence with an eye to its details, a sequence so complex (Ethan Hunt/Tom Cruise indicating the members of the second IMF team present at the Embassy) that no one is able to understand it any better than they did in wide shot.

Disproportionate: To resolve, twice over, a situation that is physically, narratively and mentally dangerous, using the same childish accessory (Ethan's chewing gum, unleashing water in Prague and fire in the TGV tunnel).

Confused: The game of coats. In the Embassy basement, waiting for the lift, Sarah/Kristin Scott-Thomas feels cold. She looks for a coat, since she hasn't brought her own along, and takes a black one positioned handily nearby. Entering the same cave-like room, Golitsyn/Marcel Iures walks past a blue coat poised on another chair. A little later in the same sequence, Jim Phelps/Jon Voight ties up his coat before fleeing; much later, in the climactic train sequence, the film cuts between two similar-looking coats moving

through the carriage, belonging to Kittridge and another, mysterious figure. After the Prague catastrophe, Ethan uses his coat to sprinkle broken glass. The game of chairs: Jim knocks over a chair that Ethan will set right some time later, while returning to the apartment after the massacre of his team: he replaces Jim as his successor. In the opening moments of the pre-credit sequence, a disguised Ethan has already set right one chair (in the film's opening shot) and knocked over another. The game of rooms: all the secret, 'operatives' spaces in the film seem the same - dark rooms full of nothing but dust and computers. What is the point of all these insistent games? Nothing, except to exacerbate the role of 'accessory' elements.

Confusing: "Well, see if you can follow me around the room: the drunk Russians on the embarkment at 7, 8 o'clock... the couple waltzing around me at 9, and at 11 the waiter standing behind Hannah [Ingeborg Dapkunaite] at the top of the stairs, bow tie 12 o'clock". When Ethan in the Prague restaurant re-presents the Embassy scene to Kittridge, he articulates two sites - the room he is in right then and the mental image of the room he was in earlier - confusing space and time. To re-read (*relire*) is to re-connect (*relier*).

Transgressive: "Absolute silence" - the scene of Ethan suspended in the FBI vault at Langley. To reduce a soundtrack to its absolute minimum requirement, a merest breath - and then to suppress even that sound altogether. (Inversely, there are many noises that have no strict narrative purpose: the cat that miaows in the spiral stairwell, the car horns in the street outside the temporary headquarters of Max/Vanessa Redgrave... disquieting sounds that put us on the alert).

Too Possible (1): "Can you hear me?", Jack/Emilio Estevez asks Sarah, who is only centimeters away. "Of course, I can hear you". And then they restart the test, this time with a receiver hidden in Sarah's ear. "You have lovely eyes. Can you hear me now?" "Loud and clear."

Too Possible (2): Ethan stops a sweat droplet from falling to the floor of the FBI's mainframe control room, simply by moving his hand to catch it.

Whoa!: One trembles at the prospect of entirely deciphering *Mission: Impossible*'s use of The Holy Bible. Irrefutable proof of Jim Phelps' guilt, it dots the fiction with telling details in the manner of a firecracker-wheel spitting sparks. Firstly as a text (although Max makes clear that 'Job' "is not given to quoting scripture in his communications"); then as a volume (hitting the floor in the London apartment, just opposite the old, unopened letters);

finally as an edition (name of The Drake Hotel Chicago stamped on the inside cover by "those damn Gideons" - but why shouldn't Jim have the right to take this Bible away with him? Such a scenario could have come straight out of the feverish imagination of a ferrel night watchman.). A permanent message and an empty signal, the Bible fills holes in the fiction like putty, thanks to the sombre weight of its immemorial Authority. When, with a decisive air, Ethan sits down at his computer with a revolver in one hand and a Bible in the other, one doesn't question this for a second: he'll get the job done, he's got the right tools, he just needs a chewing gum anymore to calm down. Is the Holy Bible Mr. Hunt's ultimate gadget?

Politically Incorrect: On the list of IMF agents that Ethan scrolls on the Langley mainframe computer, we can spot Abu Nidal - code name: Scorpion.

Irresolute: Jim hides in the very farthest compartment of the TGV baggage car, holding back instead of intervening to unmask Ethan disguised as himself, just waiting while Ethan tries to figure out, once and for all, Claire's motives.

Difficult: To become one's own symbolic father (Ethan disguised as Jim). A remarkable figural event: when Voight actually 'stands in', over the space of three shots, for the person who is meant (within the fiction) to be Cruise disguised as Jim (just as, earlier in the film, the politician Waltzer seen on Internet TV is already Tom Cruise - but not Ethan - in make-up playing Waltzer). Thus, the father is absorbed by the son - a son who is truly him only for an obscure, troubling moment.

Exciting: To make one's father return as often as possible, in the highest number of image-forms (imagining his entrapment, dreaming about him, remembering him, seeing the entrapment again but differently...), in order to kill him as often as possible.

Disavowed: Whenever Ethan has a woman in his arms, she dies (Claire in the pre-credit sequence, Sarah in Prague, Claire on the train).

Impossible: To have a (symbolic) mother younger than oneself (Ethan and Claire). 'Claire' is an antonym: she is the very figure of blurriness, upon whom, from her first appearance (shakily captured on video in the initial IMF 'theatre'), the film tries unsuccessfully to pull focus.

Impossible: To kill your mother, take her in your arms, and resuscitate her (Ethan and Claire, pre-credit sequence).

Impossible: To kill her again; and to kill her in such a way that the act belongs to the son while responsibility falls upon the father (Claire's ambiguous death on the train).

Violent (1): To make an action film in which the hero travels from one pair of female arms to the next, but never actually kisses anybody. Thus creating one of the cinema's most beautiful clinches: Claire kisses Ethan on the cheek and he, intrigued, retraces the gesture on his lips. A spy down to the tips of his toes: he prefers signs to the real thing.

Impossible: To work out whether Ethan has made love to Claire in the course of the story - a matter upon which Jim speculates. When Claire prostrates herself before Ethan and kisses his hand, he, consumed by dark thoughts, won't budge; only the helicopter in the opening shot of the following scene, cut on a matching movement, 'bows down' to her.

Violent (2): To construct a film upon the forbidden by working through the impossible (narratively, figuratively, symbolically).

"The extreme limit of the 'possible' - We are there in the end". (2)

What is impossible, is to perpetually live in a state of childishness - to be this boy in the midst of his bloodstained dream, puffed up by his magnificent privilege.

"Once more, childishness recognized as such is the glory, not the shame of man." (3)

(1) Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton, New York: W.W. Norton, 1982, p. 75.

(2) Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 37.

(3) Ibid, p. 44.

Translated by Adrian Martin.

Source: *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier, L'invention figurative au cinéma*,

Bruxelles: De Boeck, 1998, pp. 133-137.

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