

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

[1996]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1999, 2020

Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) and his Mission Impossible team are sent to Prague to catch a thief intent on stealing a computer disk that holds the names of all the covert agents in Eastern Europe. It is a trap and all but Hunt and Claire (Emmanuelle Beart), the wife of Jim Phelps (Jon Voight), are killed. Kitteridge (Henry Czerny), of the CIA, accuses Hunt of being the mole within the IMF and sets out to capture him. Hunt has no choice but to find the mole himself. To do this, he recruits two disavowed IMF agents, Krieger and Luther (Jean Reno and Ving Rhames), and together they steal the real list of operatives from deep in the center of CIA headquarters. Hunt offers to sell this list to Max (Vanessa Redgrave), an arms and information dealer, hoping the mole will be revealed. Phelps turns up alive and, when all the players converge on a high-speed train in the tunnel under the English Channel, is revealed to be the mole. Claire, in on the plot to get away with \$10 million, is killed as is Phelps. Hunt, proven innocent, is left in charge of the IMF. (Rated PG-13)

Literature has always been the greatest source of ideas and themes for film. Second is TV. Witness the recent filmings of *The Flintstones* [1994], *The Brady Bunch Movie* [1995], and the seemingly endless series of *Star Trek* movies. (Comic books run a close

third as a source of inspiration with *Batman*, *Dick Tracy* [1990], *Superman* [1987], and recently *The Phantom* [1996].) The difference between the “original” and the contemporary movie version is often a fine barometer by which we can measure the changes that have taken place in our culture between the two “media events,” in this case *Mission: Impossible* the TV show and *Mission: Impossible* the movie.

The TV series is an obvious reflection of the politics of the day: the Cold War. Our self-perceived successes in the “Cold War” against the Soviet Union and its allies were not impressive. What later became known as the Evil Empire – then simply the Red Menace – was seen as crafty, clever, and evil. As the Professor tells Roger Thornhill in 1959 in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North By Northwest* [1959], “War is hell, Mr. Thornhill, even if it is a cold one.” Outraged at his dirty tactics of prostituting female operatives, Thornhill says, “If you can’t lick the VanDamms of the world without asking girls like this to bed down with them ... perhaps you should learn how to lose a few Cold Wars.” Deflated, the Professor replies, “I’m afraid we’re already doing that.” The problem was, then, how we could see ourselves as successful in an underhanded and dirty war without stooping to the level of the enemy, without getting our own hands bloodied and thus denying our own superior morality. TV’s *Mission: Impossible* was the answer.

From 1966 to 1973, *Mission: Impossible* proved that Americans were easily as clever as the Soviets, just as canny, while remaining morally superior. With a stellar cast of Barbara Bain, Martin Landau, Greg Morris, Peter Lupus, Peter Graves, Leonard Nimoy, Lesley Ann Warren and Lynda Day George (rotating through various programs), the MI team always solved problems of international intrigue in the same way: trick the baddies into killing each other off. Is this enough plot to last seven years? Obviously not.

Mission: Impossible was never a plot driven program – every week was as comfortably predictable as the previous week with only minor variations of the basic theme (problem, foreign country, accents, clothes, disguises, electronic devices, masks, etc.). What kept the program alive – and very popular – was its ideology, mainly the bad guys are bad

enough to kill each other off and we can come out clean. While various American governmental agencies were searching Hollywood and the academic front for Communist “dupes,” on TV every week the Mission Impossible Force turned the tables on the enemy: they became our dupes!

The 1996 incarnation of *Mission: Impossible* takes place in a whole new world. The world has changed in the thirty intervening years and every wrinkle and crag of age shows in this film. It is up to date in almost every way: contemporary gender roles, no sex, and cutting edge technology – somehow every computer in the film can get instant Internet access without so much as a second’s wait. (This alone makes me distrust every character in the film.)

And the technology producing the film is equally cutting edge: Industrial Light and Magic’s special effects are stunning. (Yet there is an undeniable romantic beauty to both Prague and London, which, to my eye, completely swamps all the flashing lights and antiseptic white rooms.) But these are the changes in the physical world; what really counts in understanding *Mission: Impossible* are the changes in the moral and emotional world.

In the world of the 1996 *Mission: Impossible* the film makers have tried to reflect a typical contemporary news broadcast: corruption knows no bounds. Mr. Phelps himself is at the heart of the darkness. As played on TV by Peter Graves (who seems to have been born with white hair that always stands at military attention), upright, even, cool, and ramrod honest, he was the axis about which this idealized moral world revolved. The new Mr. Phelps, played by a sweaty and porcine Jon Voight, has no scruples at all. He even sends his wife to sleep with Hunt to further the deception.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, it seems that having lost an enemy to fight, we have also lost any need for moral superiority. While the baddies are killed in the end (by Ethan Hunt with – of all things – explosive chewing gum in a very non-Mission Impossible

style), we come away with a strong feeling that we cannot trust anyone. And the ideological chasm between the TV version and the new movie version is so broad that we cannot avoid leaving the theater looking over our shoulders, swimming in a dank sea of paranoia.

Actually, the filmmakers may have misjudged the degree of pessimism in our country in 1996. Most critics and many viewers are most interested in talking about the heist in the CIA headquarters and the final chase sequence. The rest of the film goes pretty much ignored. The theft of the computer material harks back to the old TV *Mission: Impossible*, with the good guys pulling off the most improbable escapades – here a theft equal to that of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods. But without Prometheus' punishment – the IMF gets away with it. (This scene, admittedly the best in the film, is lifted wholesale from a 1954 French film, *Rififi*, the granddaddy of all caper/heist films, in which the robbery itself is accompanied by an unbelievable and nerve-shattering twenty-minute silence.)

There is no pessimism in stealing from the middle of CIA headquarters, as there is little in the final chase where all the evildoers get their just deserts. The pessimism of the film is paraded in the long and confusing expositions between these events. While it may be that these sequences are simply too complex for an audience to appreciate, I believe it is their underlying pessimism that causes the audience to appreciate and remember the more optimistic (or neutral) episodes. America seems to crave a respite from corruption rather than another dirty dunking.

The film's symbolism seems as single-minded as its study of corruption. Everything is appropriately filmed in winter (but of whose discontent?). Every time Ethan Hunt is about to discover a new twist in the plot (of which there are more than a few), we see him crawling through some hole out into the open in an obvious imitation of a symbolic "birth into a new world," a world in which he will soon discover another layer of evil. One example: after the IMF team is assassinated, he meets with CIA boss Kitteridge in a

restaurant called the Aquarium. Needless to say, the dozens of gigantic aquariums explode in his escape when he finds out that Kitteridge is after his hide. He bursts through a window, water spills out into the street, he runs away with a wave washing down the cobblestones after him – this is a pretty literal birth image. The rest of the film is not much more subtle.

Ethan Hunt is a name with obvious meanings (nothing in this film is very subtle). Hunt, of course, indicates he is the hunter and not the prey everyone else, especially his enemies, think he is. Ethan is a reference to Ethan Allan not, I presume, the furniture manufacture (though it might as well be for all the acting Tom Cruise does), but the Revolutionary War soldier who, like Hunt, fought against the tyranny of governmental domination of the small people.

Mission: Impossible is a very popular film in part because of its star power, in part for the directoral élan of Brian de Palma, and in part for its simultaneous reflection and non-reflection of the wave of pessimism sweeping our country today. It is a simple film in which dawning disillusionment substitutes for character development. It is simple in its treatment of character: we should know not to trust Mr. Phelps from the very beginning. After all, he lights up a cigarette on an airplane! *Mission: Impossible's* bottom line could 'well be the inverse of the *X-Files*', "There is no truth out there."

Mission: Impossible. Directed by Brian de Palma. Story by David Koepp and Steven Zallian. Screenplay by David Koepp and Robert Towne. Distributed by Paramount Pictures, 1996.