The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3: A tale of two movies

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Directed by Tony Scott, screenplay by Brian Helgeland, based on the novel by John Godey

The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3 (directed by Tony Scott, from a script by Brian Helgeland) is a remake of the 1974 film with the same title. The central plotline is similar in both: a gang of criminals hijacks a single car of a New York City subway train and attempts to extort cash from city officials.

"Pelham 1 2 3" is the train's identification name and number, which simply means that it left Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx in passenger service at 1:23 pm. One of the gangsters is a subway motorman, and with his expertise cuts away all the cars except one. The criminals demand that the city pay them a large amount of money—$1 million in the original, increased to $10 million in the recent version—in no more than an hour, or they will kill the passengers one by one until the money is delivered to them.

The strength of the earlier work lay in its being more than simply a crime story. The dialogue was filled with sarcasm, cynicism and wisecracks, and through this the film was able to capture something of New York City's ambiance at the time.

The 1974 version (directed by Joseph Sargent, scripted by Peter Stone) was shot and released when the city was on the verge of fiscal bankruptcy. The mayor at the time, Abe Beame (January 1, 1974, to December 31, 1977), was a typical clubhouse politician who rose to power within the Democratic Party machine. He responded to the economic crisis by, among other measures, slashing the city workforce and freezing wages. Beame was so unpopular that he managed only a third-place finish in the 1977 Democratic mayoral primary.

The first *Taking of Pelham 1 2 3* catches some of the tensions of the period. The fictional mayor is a rather sickly, indecisive, and pathetic creature (not unlike the actual one), who decides to pay the ransom, but does not want to meet the public. His advisor convinces him that as mayor he must go out and demonstrate his leadership abilities to potential voters. As soon as His Honor arrives at a location near the crime scene, the citizens greet him with a loud chorus of boos. Upon hearing the popular reaction, a police official on the scene knows immediately who it is.

The modern version gets at none of this. The city's fiscal crises and the impoverishment of millions of New Yorkers simply do not exist for this film. Connected to this is the absence of the scoffing humor of the original, much of it directed at the powers that be, and its replacement by far greater violence; Scott's film uses contemporary special effects to drive the mayhem home.

Unlike the viewer of the original, the spectator of the new film is compelled to watch bullets penetrating the various bodies in graphic detail, with blood and gore emerging from the victims. In the scene where the police rush to deliver the extortion money, the viewer is now forced to see and hear one car crash after another, with the bodies of individual cops being pulled out of their smashed-up vehicles.

In the original, the lead criminal (Bernard Ryder, aka Mr. Blue, played by Robert Shaw) coolly and calmly states his demands in his radio communications with Command Center, which is in overall charge of the continuous movement of trains. In the new version, the chief gangster—who simply calls himself Ryder (John Travolta)—is a psychopath so consumed with rage that in his communications with transit authority officials he frequently threatens to kill a hostage.

The new Ryder is not a simple thief, as the authorities discover, but a former Wall Street operator who stole money from the city's pension system and, as a result, spent nine years in jail. Travolta's Ryder is not just looking to make $10 million, he is betting that the hijacking will drive down the stock market thus netting him a much greater financial reward.

During the negotiations, Ryder gleefully looks at his laptop, observing the stock market plummet as result of his actions. Hence, this criminal mastermind is not just a psychotic killer (he does brutally kill), but also a psychotic Wall Street short seller (an investor who seeks to make a profit by a decline rather than a rise in share values). This is very cheap populism, and sheds no light on anything.

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The hero of this movie is Walter Garber (played by Denzel Washington), a transit authority dispatcher at Command Center who takes the original phone call and demands from Ryder. When Ryder subsequently discovers that a professional police hostage negotiator has taken over the radio after telling Garber to go home, he becomes enraged and kills one of the hostages, and threatens to kill more unless Garber comes back to the desk.

The focus of the movie therefore becomes a struggle of these two very contrasting personalities: the overconfident and raging bull, Ryder, versus the mild-mannered and somewhat inept civil servant, Garber (who, at the beginning of the film before the kidnapping takes place, manages to spill a cup of coffee on himself). The strength of the film is the ability of the two actors to play off one another as the drama unfolds mostly through their radio communications. This strength, however, is largely overshadowed by the rest of the goings-on.

Ryder learns from one of his fellow criminals, and from his laptop, that Garber was previously a manager who was demoted because he was suspected of taking a $35,000 bribe from Japanese interests to recommend that the transit authority buy the subway trains currently in use. Ryder demands that Garber confess to the crime or he will murder another hostage.

In the struggle between the clumsy, low-key dispatcher and the criminal mastermind, guess who wins? The filmmakers organize an unlikely combination of circumstances and heroics that could only occur in a Hollywood movie.

The mayor in Tony Scott's movie is portrayed as a multimillionaire, an obvious reference to New York's current mayor, Michael Bloomberg (who is actually a multibillionaire!). In a poor attempt to recreate some of the flavor of the 1974 version, he is portrayed in less than flattering terms. However, the filmmakers can't help themselves, and the mayor comes through in the film's patriotic, "feel-good" end.

Even the not-so-flawless, mild-mannered civil servants of the world, it turns out, can perform heroically against the forces of evil and terrorism.

This is in sharp contrast to the conclusion of the Sargent-Stone film. In that movie, the hero is a caustic transit police lieutenant named Zachary Garber (Walther Matthau). Three of the bad guys are killed, but an ex-motorman gets away. Garber and another police officer (played by Jerry Stiller) decide to check up on all former motormen who have been fired by the transit authority.

Garber and the other officer pay a visit to the actual criminal (Martin Balsam), and in response to their questions, the former train operator claims to have been home all day. Just as the two cops apologize for disturbing him and are in the process of going out the front door, the man sneezes, as he did constantly during the radio communications in the hijacking. The scene is more amusing than it is a dramatic or heroic, as Matthau's character sticks his head back through the door and gives the ex-motorman a look that says it all—you just gave yourself away, buddy.

The original was a crime story, but it never took itself seriously simply as a tale of cops and robbers. The 1974 version, something of a picture of New York City in a state of deep financial and moral decline, belongs to a genre that found a more worked-out expression in Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) (as well as a more hysterical and probably less convincing expression in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* [1976]).

The popularity and reputation of the original made it inevitable, in this age of limited film studio imagination, that the industry would undertake to redo it.

The current film represents a decline both in form and content. Of course, in these "over-the-top" days, the new Ryder cannot be a common criminal. He must be a "mastermind" of some sort or another seeking to wreak catastrophic damage. The atmosphere set in motion by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 provides a backdrop for the action, but none of that has been thought through or digested seriously.

It is unfortunate, but all too predictable, that Scott's film replaces the humor and elementary social insight of the original with scenes of mindless violence. And, under conditions where the fiscal crisis is far deeper and social misery far wider than in the mid-1970s, no reference is made to either phenomenon. Instead of any hint of more complex social issues, we have a Hollywood-style law-and-order ending.

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