

The Fast & Furious Art of the Car Chase

Hot pursuits are a staple of summer blockbusters — remember them? — so we asked the director Justin Lin to break down five of our favorites.



By **Mekado Murphy**

July 1, 2020

In the movies, there’s nothing quite like the thrill of the car chase. The best ones create the same adrenaline rush in their audiences as they do in their characters. Generating that heightened, you-are-there energy is a feat that involves meticulous preparation, including dozens of decisions about camera placement, vehicle speed and so much more.

So how to get it all just right? We went to a Hollywood expert for answers. With five “Fast & Furious” films to his credit (including the delayed but anticipated “F9”), the director Justin Lin has helped craft some of the most elaborate and exciting chases in recent cinema.

We asked him to break down five breathtaking chases from movie history (including one from his own “Fast Five”) and explain what makes them so effective. Here are edited excerpts.



San Francisco streets pose a challenge in “Bullitt.” Warner Bros.

1968

‘Bullitt’

Rent on Amazon Prime Video, YouTube or iTunes.

In this action thriller from Peter Yates, Steve McQueen plays the title character, a San Francisco police detective tasked with guarding a gangster. But hit men get in the way, setting off one of the most memorable car chases in all of cinema, with Bullitt in a Ford Mustang and the bad guys in a Dodge Charger.

Justin Lin: What I love is that there is no music. They made the choice of having the engine noises be the score. In this sequence, you really get a sense of environment and it feels very authentic. You actually see Steve McQueen driving a car and, in the same shot, the tires hitting the ground. For filmmakers doing action sequences, that’s one of the gold-standard shots that we always try to get because it’s obviously very dangerous to do, to put an actor in a high-speed vehicle and be able to design a [pre-visual effects] shot that feels effortless.



A car chase that involves an elevated train. Mary Evans and Ronald Grant/20th Century Fox, via Everett Collection

1971

'The French Connection'

Rent on Amazon Prime Video, YouTube and iTunes.

In William Friedkin's Oscar-winning drama, Gene Hackman plays Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle, a New York police detective investigating a drug-smuggling crime boss. After an encounter with a hit man, Popeye heads after him. The villain is trying to escape by elevated train, while Popeye follows the tracks in a car below.

Lin: It has a similar approach to "Bullitt" in that there is no score. And I love the fact that it's trying to take you into the moment. There's the choice here to have a lot more of the hand-held [camera shots] to capture the state of the character. One of the things I like is that it's introducing the point of view of the car. There's a mount shot [from a camera mounted on the car] that they keep going back to where they're just running that car at high speed down the road. One of the things that I've learned is that with all the technology, you cannot fake practical speed. There's something about the physics of having a car going at high speed that, even if you try to replicate it in C.G., you just don't get the rush.

But the one little choice that really helped define the sequence is when Gene Hackman is screaming and you don't hear the scream. You're hearing the brakes, you're hearing the squeal of the wheels as he's driving at high speed, you're cutting to the train: It's all about bringing you in. And just when you feel like you're fully in and can feel the state of Hackman's character, he screams. The choice to not hear the scream at all, I just think it defines the sequence.



Edward Furlong fleeing the relentless T-1000 Terminator. TriStar Pictures

1991

'Terminator 2: Judgment Day'

Rent on Amazon Prime Video, YouTube and iTunes.

In James Cameron's sequel to his 1984 smash, Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) and her son, John (Edward Furlong), are targeted by the T-1000 high-tech Terminator, (Robert Patrick) while being guarded by the original Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger). In this scene, the T-1000 has commandeered a semi while John and the Terminator are on two wheels.

Lin: One of the things in the construct of the sequence that I love is how controlled it is. The two Terminators are so unfazed. In the midst of all this craziness and action, there's a calmness to it. You could tell that James Cameron and Arnold had a great relationship with the crew and there was a lot of trust because, when you go into these sequences, you're trying to challenge each other. There's a lot of danger and there's a lot of prep and you're always pushing each other to see if you can just eke out a few more frames. A simple thing of the stunt guy getting thrown onto the street, to be able to hold on that shot just an extra 12 seconds makes all the difference in the world.



That's a vault on the right being dragged into a chase scene in "Fast Five." Universal Pictures

2011

'Fast Five'

Stream on HBO.

This was Lin's third "Fast & Furious" film, but the first time the franchise veered into the heist lane. Not to worry, the cars are still there, and they go all out in a sequence in which the crew steals a crime lord's cash-filled vault via cables attached to two cars, with the cops in pursuit.

Lin: What was important about this was the decision to do this practically. There were a lot of talks about, hey, let's do a C.G.I. vault. And I just didn't want to do that. I think that was going to take all the fun out of what we could potentially accomplish. So we actually had a vault and the two cars dragging it. We had [another] vault where it was drivable. It was actually a vehicle and, for certain shots, we would use that. It is so insane to say, hey, let's really plan this out and do everything practically. I'm proud of that sequence because it helped redefine the franchise into who we were going to be.



Blake Lively is at the wheel in "The Rhythm Section." Paramount Pictures, via Everett Collection

2020

'The Rhythm Section'

Rent on Amazon Prime Video and YouTube.

In Reed Morano's thriller, Blake Lively plays a woman who falls into a life of espionage. In one scene, she drives away pursued by killers through the narrow streets of Tangier in what seems like one long shot.

Lin: I love this sequence because it's a decision by the director that you're just going to stay with the character in real time. And to put the camera in the passenger side, I thought, was a great choice. To be able to design the shot where you're not seeing the cuts, it brings back the choices of "Bullitt" and "French Connection," in that there is a sincerity to the sequence. I always feel like when we edit, it's a cheat. And so, when I work with my editors, we always say that if we're going to cut, we have to earn that cut. And here, the choice of not at least appearing that there are any cuts in the sequence is important because it's telling you why you're in this situation with the character.