

Introduction

It really is a great, revered moment in the history of action cinema, all the more thrilling because so wondrous and unexpected. The film is *The Great Escape*, directed by John Sturges in 1962 and released in 1963. Steve McQueen is Virgil Hilts, a World War II POW who's now managed, after so many scenes of dashed escape efforts and nail-biting suspense, to get out of a German prison camp with seventy-five others—and with loads of Nazis in hot pursuit. He's zooming his way, on a stolen motorcycle, toward hoped-for freedom. As McQueen careens around looking for a path out, a long, double row of barbed wire fence appears along the horizon in front of him. He pulls back from this obstacle and reflects for a moment. (I should note that I'll often be switching indiscriminately between the actor's name and his character's, since this is so much about the star turn—about an actor who takes over the role and makes it an extension of his own on- and off-screen charisma and cool.)

McQueen resolutely guns his bike's engine to zoom forward and a moment of movie magic happens, immediately and enduringly



Dreams of flight

famous: the rider and his bike take flight for an instant and, up over the first line of barbed wire, man and machine soar through the air. The first time you see this scene, you're easily astounded. If you're watching it in a movie theater on a big screen, it's quite possible that your fellow viewers will join in with gasps of amazement and maybe even cheers or applause. This is how classic movie memories are made. (Although some fans persist in believing that McQueen himself performed the jump, it seems pretty clear that stunt driver Bud Ekins did it, as the studio wouldn't permit their big star to endanger himself. It has been claimed, though, that when the cameras weren't rolling, McQueen himself enacted the leap just to show he could.)

Within the history of rousing action cinema, *The Great Escape* continues to stand out to this day. In *Sleepless in Seattle*, two guys counter with *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) when the wife of one of them goes on about the tearful impact of the romance film *An Affair to Remember*. But they could as easily have cited John Sturges's prison-escape saga from a few years earlier. In my own experience, all you have to do is mention *The Great Escape* among guys (and not only guys, it must be said) who love action movies, and they'll gleefully, even boisterously, start citing memorable scenes. For its fans, and they are legion, the film can appear perfect and almost beyond criticism. It seems to sum up a certain kind of rip-roaring Hollywood

adventure, with a contagious score that—in a kind of macho intermediality—is often played as the overture to football matches by UK teams (evidently, this started with the 1998 World Cup and a rousing version of the tune that led to a hit single).¹ It displays great production values—for example, terrific set design, from the camp barracks to the tunnel. It generates tremendous suspense—at multiple moments—even as it also embraces a rollicking comic mode that lulls you into thinking that these escapees really may have gotten away. It offers great ensemble acting (just watch, for instance, the back-and-forth between Hilts, escape mastermind Bartlett, and his assistant MacDonald as the latter two try to enlist the individualist American in their collective escape project), and this to such a confident degree that several of the actors are also permitted their own star turns, separate from the ensemble, in which they do some of their best work.

Indeed, many fans of the film (and I'm in agreement) find the stars of *The Great Escape* to be at the top of their game here. Thus, even some aficionados of the film who fault James Coburn's imitation of an Australian (as he goes in and out of the accent) nonetheless find themselves won over by his unflappability as Sedgwick (aka "The Manufacturer") and by the humor in several of his scenes. Sometimes the joke is at Sedgwick's expense, deriving from his cockiness—as seen, for instance, when he discovers that the one Russian phrase that Danny can teach him is "I love you" ("What bloody good is that?" "I don't know: I wasn't going to use it myself") or when he realizes that something is up at a French café, seeing the bartender and waiter (father and son?) duck behind the counter, and decides it's probably more than advisable to join them.

For those who revere it, the virtues of *The Great Escape* are many. It is filled, from beginning to end, with the derring-do of resourceful men who can tinker their way to freedom via inventive gizmos galore. Even as it appeals to the senses through action sequences of strong men—often beautifully bodied, cool, lithe men—*The Great Escape* also offers a geeky hardware fascination. In this respect, as

I'll discuss later, it is a sort of variant on the genre of the caper film, with each prisoner having his specialization within the team that's plotting the breakout; each prisoner, indeed, has a moniker that defines him as one with that specialization—the Scrounger, the Forger, Danny the Tunnel King, and so on—another aspect of the film that the fans love to cite.

And, of course, *The Great Escape* has that iconic scene in which man and machine fly together, over a high barbed wire fence. It is one small, but revealing, mark of its status in our movie memory bank that several reeditions of the book *The Great Escape*—Paul Brickhill's original, firsthand, nonfiction account of the actual escape, which featured *no motorcycles* soaring through the air and included in fact *no Americans*—sport McQueen on the cover, as if he retroactively defines the 1950 volume that initiated the telling of the tale, and even defines that real-life story itself, filtered now through its cinematic adaptation.²

Also iconic in this respect, and also showing McQueen's star-turn hold on our memories of *The Great Escape*, are the scenes of Hilts tenaciously bouncing his baseball off the walls of the "cooler" (prison camp incarceration cell) that he is constantly being sent off to as his inevitable fate. The first time around, early in the film, we see him slouch to the ground and start to throw the ball, and the scene cuts to the corridor outside, where we hear only the sound and witness the guard's quiet registering of the gesture. Three times more, including at the film's very end, McQueen will be returned to the cooler, and over and again that baseball resounds. In the very last shot, the guard has again started to walk away down the corridor but stops in his tracks and turns ever so slightly as the ricocheting sound starts up again. It is hard to know exactly what his thoughts are. Does he regret the circumstances that have brought Hilts back to his guardianship? Is he struck by some sign of accepting yet rebellious attitude in the gesture? The scene, as it concludes the film, signals both the hero's resignation—once again, Hilts has been returned to the cooler, and the cycles of escape and probable recapture have to start up all over



An all-American pastime

again—and resilience: this Yank, engaged in a very American activity, reminds his enemy that he is still there, undefeated and unbroken.

Like the motorcycle chase, and especially the magical flight through the air, the baseball-throwing scenes remain tenaciously in our movie memories. Later film and television works that have paid homage to them, relying on in-the-know spectators to make the connection, include Johnnie To's Hong Kong action film *The Longest Nite* (1998) and animated comedies such as *Chicken Run*. Some of these references are quite astute indeed. For example, in the *The Longest Nite* a hit man, when jailed by corrupt police, bounces a little red ball in his cell as a symbol of defiant resilience. In the amoral world of *The Longest Nite*, this allusion gives the hit man a standout edge of unflappable cool that doesn't exonerate him morally but does separate him a bit from the sleaze around him.³

It is revealing, in regard to the lasting impression made by these scenes, that when film and media scholar David Jenemann, indulging his nonprofessional interest in baseball, wrote a cultural studies monograph on the history of the baseball glove, he still had to go back to cinema, impelled specifically to return to *The Great Escape*, noting that McQueen with the baseball is "so iconic that it is evoked in various popular culture mashups. . . . In each of these references, the baseball glove is used as a means of conveniently identifying and

commenting on a certain brand of distinctly American problem-solving in the face of adversity and commenting on that legacy.”⁴ In a follow-up email, David helpfully reminded me that a scene in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)—where Thor tries to recruit fellow prisoner the Hulk, along with female warrior 142, to flee imprisonment in the Grandmaster’s palace and save the endangered planet Asgard—contains a reference to *The Great Escape*. As Thor tries to argue his case for a team mission, Hulk is seen in the background bouncing a big ball off one of the palace walls that enclose them (not needing a mitt, since his hands are so large) and answering Thor’s entreaties with a declaration, in the spirit of Hilts, of independence from all collaboration (“No team! Only Hulk!” the big guy growls). Thor announces he’ll go it alone if he has to, and signals to Hulk to toss him the ball. With pumping heroic music building on the soundtrack, Thor portentously proclaims that “I choose to run toward my problems and not from them” and hurls the ball against a large window as if to shatter it and enable his escape. But the projectile rebounds and knocks him to the ground. The scene combines themes of loner individualism and resilient heroism with a comic undercutting that is typical of films from the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe).

As I’ve already suggested, the baseball sequences in *The Great Escape* have their more dispiriting side, along with the resilience and rebellion. As much as they signal steadfastness, they also mark repetitions in a cycle of endless setback, since Hilts is returned each time to square one (literally to the tightly enclosed and sparse square of his room in solitary) and appears to become more resigned to his fate with each subsequent lockup (though the final time he seems perhaps a bit more defiant than previously). There’s something unsettling in this iconic image that blends moral triumph with physical defeat.

Revealingly, though, things turn out not much better when McQueen engages in that iconic, seemingly rousing attempt at a getaway on a soaring motorcycle. We need to return to that impressive scene of man and machine and recollect what happens next: all that McQueen’s initially thrilling jump has accomplished is to put

his character in a channel between a first fence of barbed wire and a much higher and more foreboding one. Nazis are pouring in from each end to bottle up his easy paths out. So McQueen makes another energetic dash on his motorcycle, and we perhaps readily imagine he'll repeat the movie miracle.

At least I know I did, if I may speak autobiographically. Seeing the film as a kid in the 1960s, and believing in heroes, believing in stars (especially when they played heroes), I easily—and with some deeply internalized confidence in the cheery optimism of Hollywood entertainment—expected a new feat of soaring magic of some sort. After the first jump, some emotional part of me could not believe that anything could or would stand in the way of this superhero, even though—in some other part of me—faith in the fundamentally upbeat nature of the Hollywood action film had already, by this late point in the film, been sorely tested. Characters had given in to vulnerability or infirmity (blindness, claustrophobia). The escape itself had released many fewer men than rousing promised early in the film. From midway on, characters I liked had started getting thwarted in the escape attempt, and some actually *got killed*, something that just wasn't supposed to happen at the movies. In fact, McQueen's big action scene itself came sequentially on the heels of a very impactful setback: the death of the gentle, affable, somewhat sad Blythe (Donald Pleasence), shot in the back, and the capture of his bloodied escape partner, Eagle Squadron enlistee Hendley (James Garner), the movie's only other important Yank (and, in his own manner, as cool as Hiltz—both in the depiction of the character and in the aura of the star playing him).

At some level, then, even as we may deny it, we're aware in some submerged and conflicted way that anything—good or bad—might happen as McQueen attempts another leap. This time, in his second run on the motorcycle, bullets ring out and he smashes into the second line of wire, which entangles him in ignominious fashion as the Germans encircle him and bring his escape to an end. McQueen pats the shot-up motorcycle with affection as he gives in resignedly to his