

Eric Seiley

Big Words, Small Essays

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In the Heat of the Romantic, Eclectic, Drama Movie Genre Mashup Night

The odd and exciting world of movie genre mashups has been on my mind of late. Combining the delicate balance of action, drama, mystery, and thriller mashed incongruently with a blend of comedy, horror, western, and any other selection of genres is not unlike Willy Wonka's all-in-one dinner gum – a wonderful invention when it goes well, but ends up bloated and overly done most times leaving a bad taste. Mashups were never a natural cinematic construct taken on lightly by the establishment. And only the most brave, dedicated, and skilled of cinematic auteurs, with at least a double portion of *nuts*, would ever attempt to pull it off. In fact, most film experts agree such endeavors, though occasionally successful, are rarely worth the aggravation rendering the creator's reputation and film career nearly null and void. Think of it this way. If a movie flops by normal standard, the damage always hurts, but recovery is possible. But a movie mashup potentiates the "suck" well beyond normal into "who in their right mind would try such a thing?" The auteur left wallowing in a very distinct, Christopher Walken playing Russian roulette in *Deer Hunter*, territory of guilt, shame, and "I told you so" recrimination.

Everyone knows creating movies can be a wonderful burden -- they are the labor of Sisyphus in our modern century. But genre mashup movies are so eclectic, odd, and unusual, creating one, even the successful films, are cinematically like Sisyphus riding a

unicycle in a windstorm naked a thousand feet above the ground without parachute or safety net trying to push the boulder up the hill. No sane person would ever attempt such a thing. Still, thank goodness, there are those who try. And even succeed. To successfully create a movie mashup gem, means producing one of the greatest, most satisfying nirvanas of cinema life any person could ever experience. There is little doubt why so many have tried -- the payoff is timeless. Success means you get *Blade Runner* (1982), *Big Trouble in Little China* (1985) and *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). On paper, possibly the biggest mistakes ever undertaken in which no part added up to the whole. But the final film product, oh my! Still the gold standard for every beloved and brilliant genre mashup movie to this day.

Sadly, most genre mashup fail like Frankenstein's monster – too hideous or without human sympathy to exist in decent society. Careers are hurt and damage is done. But the practitioners can recover if cult status is attained and the film lives on the fringes – think *Eraserhead* (1978). However, if the film is taken too far, too weird or strange -- or just too hair-brained in execution, like *The Stuff* (1985) , the plummeting thud reaching the bottom of a very deep ravine will be experienced beyond all else. Chevy Chase, Dan Akroyd, and poor John Candy felt it with *Nothing But Trouble* in 2001. Similarly Bernadette Peters and Allan Arkush with *Heartbeeps* in 1981. The saying, “*And they were never really heard from again*” aptly applies. Recovering from such extreme cinematic falls is near impossible.

Movie genre mashups are obviously a serious tightrope of production and skill requiring as much luck and karma, as well as talent and timing to create. And should never be undertaken lightly lest all involved are willing to be exposed as posers, generating fan hate of serious nuclear derision that lasts decades. Think John Travolta, who suffered nearly two decades worth, post-1978's *Grease*, exposed as the severely “uncool” acting hack he was -- till Tarantino resurrected him with *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

and foisted a post-Travolta onto the film world. Or Clint Eastwood with his truly ill-advised mash-up *Paint Your Wagon* (1968) which set a path of one horrible choice after another throughout the 70's and early 80's. Though, in all fairness, Eastwood, rather than wait for someone to save him, took his own reins and went back to formula directing and writing dramas and westerns till he shot up past them all into the heavens with *Unforgiven* (1992). The greatest cinematic redemption story we possibly have.

But for every few successes, we have limitless failure. Judd Apatow being the epitome of the worst mash up offender. Not only has his meager talent and hubris condemned him, but he also mentored far too many self-important and inept "comedy" acolytes who went on to taint nearly an entire genre for a decade and running. No acolytes worse than the most offensive, highly moronic Jonah Hill-James Franco-Seth Rogan mashup, *This is the End* (2013), which imploded like the distasteful, plasticine, synthetic comedy-apocalypse-satire microwave trope it was all over the clean white canvas of what is the summer movie release. I won't dissect the movie, but know that every person involved in this turd should suffer and deserve their pain! Even the one or two accidental actors we can sympathize with for naïvely trusting their professional careers to the hands of such idiots (and not in a good way) Seth Rogan, James Franco, and Jonah Hill. I'm referring to Emma Watson and Mindy Kaling, of course. Though you should've *known better* if you'd bothered to watch what Franco and Danny McBride did to Natalie Portman in 2011's *Your Highness*. Another horrendous mashup she was lucky to walk away from thanks to her high-powered acting chops and intense seriousness.

Of course, there are no foolproof methods to guide a great genre mashup movie, which is the point, except to say navigating the tightrope to a successfully produced cinematic blessing can be reward itself -- an unparalleled enjoyment requiring the blessings of cinematic fate.

Here then are my twenty favorite, well-fated genre mashup movies:

1. *Big Trouble in Little China* (1985) – combines a modern take on the western with action, comedy, scifi, kung fu, and satire. By far, the best of the mashup genre.
2. *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010) – I don't know why I like this mashup movie other than to say I've watched and re-watched it at least a dozen times and it never gets old. With a lightly insightful message, albeit video game style, in the end.
3. *Outland* (1981), *Last Man Standing* (1996), and *Near Dark* (1987) – all primarily western noir -- one infused into outer space (*Outland*), one gangland (*Last Man Standing*), and one vampire (*Near Dark*) movie. Each visceral, watchable, and well done!
4. *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) & *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) – clever, funny, bugs bunny style martial arts with a heavy dose of lore and Charlie Chaplin / Buster Keaton emotional drama. From the great, creative mind of Stephen Chow.
5. *Being John Malkovich* (1999) – from the mind of Charlie Kaufman, this one is too odd to describe even for him. But the way it comes together is phenomenal.
6. *Dead Man* (1996) what do you get if you take a western infused with Johnny Depp's *laisse faire* and Jim Jarmusch sensibilities? A film even Crispin Glover could relate to.
7. *The Scouts Guide to the Apocalypse* (2015) and *Dead and Breakfast* (2010) – you gotta love a good romance, comedy, zombie movie. With dancing!
8. *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) – the history is too rich, and the songs too wonderful. With every performer at peak form and perfectly cast. A treat for every age.

9. Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) – not really in my top 20 other than to say this cult favorite should never be forgotten or excluded. Great as much for its genre mashup as its ability to both entertain and offend at the same time.
10. Everything Everywhere All At Once (2022) – another interesting mashup that should be rewarded for its creativity and boldness even if it does get a little overblown. Defies expectations and makes it work! This is how films should be attempted rather than some Hollywood accountant kicking out another polished Marvel turd.
11. Dark City (1998) – the predecessor to Matrix and the modern scifi noir trope. A cinematically beautiful film, detective noir mashup story which, unfortunately begins well, but slows dangerously by the end of the first act verging on becoming too boring. Actually feels like a new director took over with the second act and things go much better. The second act picks up the pace and you begin to experience a wonderful mashup ride all the way to the third act and the director's cut ending that satisfies! Completely unexpected and, if not original, definitely unique and worthy of its cult status. This one could've been one of the greats, but suffers from too many miscues.
12. Tucker and Dale vs. Evil (2010) – a great play against tropes that is as pitch perfect as its two lead actors. Rednecks have brains and heart too, you know! And can be very sensitive. Say no more.
13. Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1985) – popular when it first came out, and not necessarily for the wrong reasons, this film actually drips with anti-societal, "damn the man" subtext coated over by a heavy layer of confidence man arrogance to distract its real message. That the charm of the sociopath and the narcissist will eventually lull us into letting them run the world.
14. Cabin in the Woods (2011) – just a good old fashioned mash up that turns your standard jock, virgin, stoner, cheerleader, slut character trope of all our classic

80's & 90's horror monster movies on its side in the most clever of ways. Fun from beginning to end. An underrated gem.

15. *The Last Dragon* (1985) – for those who caught this little piece of magic in the theaters back in the pre-internet days, we know how blessed we were. And how hard it is to explain such sweet films to the modern millennia of children currently being raised on streaming Disney, post-internet.
16. *John Dies in the End* (2012) – more of a B-movie, but I loved the quirky sensibility and effort. Not necessarily a homage to Buckaroo or Big Trouble, but certainly in that arena.
17. *The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai Across the Eighth Dimension* (1984) – oh, what could've been! A wonderful and eclectic cult film, based on a comic, that barely works. All the parts are there, and most of the right players. The film is even cohesive (thank goodness). But it just doesn't quite work in totality. Though I wanted it to. Oh, what could've been! What a film this could've been! If ever I wanted to remake a movie (and generally I don't), this would be the one.
18. *The Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977) – I'm not a big fan of overly broad humor, or of raunchiness or comedy, but this film is the granddaddy that spurred In Living Color, Boys in the Hall, and just about every comedy troop in the pantheon since the 70's. Akin to It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World for the older stars of yesterday set.
19. *Back to the Future* (1985) – as a standalone, this might be the perfect movie. Pitch perfect from neon beginning to nostalgic second act twist to awkward ending. Zemeckis is far superior to Spielberg!
20. *Happy Death Day* (2017) – does what few other films do, takes cynicism and turns it into biting triumph. I was so pleasantly surprised by this mashup!