

# Ten Bad Films by Ten Great Directors

Spielberg, Hitchcock, Kubrick, Lynch...  
They all have their duds.

[Simon Dillon](#)

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Kyle MacLachlan wonders if the budget will stretch to convincing giant sandworms in Dune (1984). Credit: Universal

Even the greatest directors have off-days, and indeed “off-films”. Here then are ten examples of movies from great directors that either I consider objectively bad, or at the very least fall considerably short of their own high standards. This list is by no means exhaustive, but I wanted

to keep it to ten.

To keep things accessible to non-cineastes, I've mostly selected mainstream American or British directors to illustrate my point. So please don't snootily quibble about my omission of Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Andrei Tarkovsky, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard and so forth. (For the record, regarding the latter, Godard may have directed the seminal *A bout de souffle*, but after disappearing up his own backside in the late 1960s, is also responsible for a plethora of pretentious cinematic flatulence like *Film Socialisme*, which would have been a fine choice for this list.)

## Prometheus (2012)



Credit: 20th Century Fox

Ridley Scott's return to the franchise that made him famous

seemed like a good idea at the time. After a series of increasingly dismal entries in the *Alien* series, giving it back to the man who started it filled me with great expectations. Sadly, my expectations were dashed. Despite tremendous production design, a great cast, lavish visual effects, and generally looking fabulous, *Prometheus* — or *Promethearse*, as I call it — lacks the vital ingredient of a great script.

Stuck somewhere between 2001-style meaning of life musings and gnarly sci-fi horror, *Prometheus* ends up being neither fish nor fowl. It isn't intellectually astute enough to delve into the question of what it means to be human, nor is it scary enough to get anywhere near the sweaty terror of the original film. Worst of all, it is utterly incoherent, with forgettable characters making inexplicably stupid decisions. There isn't even a proper climax; merely a lazy set-up for the next film (the equally inept *Alien: Covenant*).

Scott claims he wanted to explain the origins of the "Space Jockey" alien corpse found in the first act of the first film. But here's the thing: Once you've got an acid-blooded xenomorph decimating the cast to terrifyingly gruesome effect, no one gives an airborne fornication about the origin of whatever poor alien race had the misfortune to cross paths with these beasties. It's merely a mysterious, atmospheric background vista that doesn't require explanation in a horror film. Sorry, Ridley. I loved *Alien*, but this time you blew it.

# Killer's Kiss (1955)



Credit: United Artists

Calling Stanley Kubrick's second feature bad is a bit of a stretch, as there is plenty in this tale of a washed-up welterweight boxer that announces him as a talent to be watched. The hand-held camerawork in fight scenes and use of real New York locations certainly added value to a film shot on a shoestring budget. However, it certainly isn't as polished, provocative, or downright singular as his later works, and Kubrick himself admitted the piece was made as a means to an end.

For one thing, there's nothing particularly original in the noir-ish on-the-run narrative. The acting and dialogue aren't great either. Kubrick chose to shoot the film silently then add in all dialogue and sound effects in post-production, which led to a few inexplicable goofs (a car

driving with no noise in the background, for instance). The lip-sync is a bit out at times as well.

Such technical issues aside, again I would stress that calling this one bad is definitely an overreach, but I wanted to include it here purely in contrast to Kubrick's later outstanding work. His next film, *The Killing*, was far stronger and constitutes the start of an unbroken run of masterpieces.

## Family Plot (1976)



Credit: Universal

From a debut to a swansong, Alfred Hitchcock's *Family Plot* — or *Family Plod* as I call it — again isn't bad exactly. However, it is deeply average, remarkably unremarkable, and entirely forgettable. Such sentiments ought not be

associated with a film from the man who made *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, and *North by Northwest*.

Speaking of the latter, *North by Northwest* is what *Family Plot* most represents, in terms of plot beats. However, this one lacks the wit and spark of the former masterpiece, not to mention the sizzling romantic chemistry between Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint, and the memorably villainous James Mason. Instead, we get the rather damp-squib pairing of Barbara Harris and Bruce Dern, as a phoney psychic con artist and out-of-work actor caught up in kidnapping shenanigans, courtesy of blandly written villains in the form of Karen Black and William Devane. The iconic crop-duster sequence of *North by Northwest* is even given a rehash of sorts, but again, to instantly forgettable effect.

All things considered, this film is little more than Hitchcock attempting to revisit past glories than adding anything of innovative significance to his hugely impressive CV. It just about scrapes a pass as a lightly comic time-filler, but it's one for Hitchcock completists only.

## **Avatar (2009)**



Credit: 20th Century Fox

*Avatar* has the unfortunate distinction of being the only James Cameron film I actively dislike. Even the flawed *Titanic* is satisfying in a blunt instrument spectacle kind of way, despite one-dimensional characterisation. This however is *The Matrix* meets *Dances with Wolves* on another planet, with none of the excitement of the former or the emotional heft of the latter.

Yes, it all looks visually stunning, with lots of lovely "world-building", great special effects, and otherwise top-notch efforts at a technical level. But the script is a leaden, finger-wagging, humourless bore, with all the nuance of a naïve undergraduate spouting simplistic, reductive student politic claptrap. Repeat after me: "Capitalism bad.

Environmentalism good. Capitalism bad. Environmentalism good..." Not long into this tedious sermon, I developed a disturbing, irrational urge to pick up a gun, oppress some natives, and strip-mine a third-world country with

exploitative imperialist glee, just to spite James Cameron. Not quite the reaction he was looking for, I suspect.

At-one-with-nature New Age twaddle can be done well when it isn't preachy (see pretty much anything directed by Terrence Malick, or even Yoda's monologues in *The Empire Strikes Back*). But Cameron seems determined to bludgeon his audience into tree-hugging submission, despite his own hugely hypocritical obsession with technology. Oh, and yes, I see what you did there with the 9/11 imagery James. Very subtle.

## The Sound Barrier (1952)



Credit: British Lion Films



David Lean is responsible for many of the greatest films ever committed to celluloid, including [Great Expectations](#), *Brief Encounter*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, [Doctor Zhivago](#), and *Lawrence of Arabia*. However, this one isn't in anything like the same league. Moreover, in its fictionalised tale of British aeronautical engineers and pilots trying to break the sound barrier, it overlooks the inconvenient truth that in fact Chuck Yeager, an American, was the first to reach Mach speed.

Normally it is my fellow Brits who eye-roll about wild historical inaccuracies in films — *The Patriot*, *U-571*, or *Braveheart* for instance. However, for once the Americans have something to complain about. That said, it must be stressed that Lean's film isn't bad per se. For one thing, there are some fine performances from Ralph Richardson, Denholm Elliott, and Ann Todd. But it's all a bit talky and long-winded. As with Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss*, I've included it here more to put the greatness of Lean's other work into context.

## **Dune (1984)**



Credit: Universal

Despite some great reviews, and despite my cautious faith in Denis Villeneuve, [I remain dubious about the prospect of the upcoming \*Dune\* film](#). Wrestling Frank Herbert's legendary epic sci-fi tome into coherent cinematic form is a task that has defeated a number of filmmakers, including the normally brilliant David Lynch. I am a huge fan of his other work, but *Dune* is the one movie in his back catalogue where he bit off more than he could chew.

Although it received poor reviews and bombed at the box office, Lynch's *Dune* does have a few admirers who have tried to reappraise it. Typically what they'll tell you is that you have to watch some fan edit or other that restores key footage, but although the shorter running time of the official version doesn't help, posthumous fan tinkering doesn't correct the fundamental problem of the dreadful script. Yes,

you can praise the admittedly impressive production design, costumes, and casting (though Sting in a codpiece remains a hilariously wooden misstep). Lynch does show some occasional flair for spectacle — at least before the visual effects budget runs out — but whatever way you cut it, this is a lead balloon of a film.

Lynch's version is baffling, oppressive, incoherent, joyless, and dull. It misses the essence of what made the novel great in its allegory of the politics around oil dependence, not to mention the damning critique of messiah figures. Huge swathes of vital plot developments are rushed over or omitted, and the film has none of the novel's dramatic irony. On top of that, it adds unnecessary extra sadism in the form of the notorious "heart plug" sequence; a twisted Lynchian innovation that belonged in a horror film, not the *Dune* universe.

## **The Ladykillers (2004)**



Credit: Buena Vista

As far as I'm concerned, the Coen Brothers have never made a bad film, except this one. Again, in fairness, it is only bad in comparison to their impossibly high standards. Given they have churned out a continual stream of masterpieces — *Miller's Crossing*, *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Oh Brother*, *Where Art Thou?*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *No Country For Old Men*, *A Serious Man*, *True Grit*, *Inside Llewyn Davies*, and so forth — I think we can allow them this one misstep.

Said misstep is a remake of classic British Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*. This darkly comic tale of a gang of thieves posing as musicians using a seemingly harmless old lady's house as a base of operations is transported to the Deep South in the Coen Brothers's take. Thus, it loses its British eccentricity and charm. The Coens version isn't without

laughs exactly, and the change in location and culture works reasonably well to a point, but I've never been inclined to view the film again. By contrast, the original version is a perennial favourite.

## **Pret-a-Porter (1994)**



Credit: Miramax

Robert Altman was responsible for some of the greatest films ever made, including *MASH*, *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, and *Gosford Park*. His maverick, darkly comic, often satirical sensibilities have always made for interesting viewing, whatever project he undertook. However, when he set his eye on the fashion industry — a target ripe for a good kicking — he somehow shot wide of the mark.

*Pret-a-Porter* features a fantastic ensemble cast in true Altman fashion. The likes of Marcello Mastroianni, Sophia Loren, Rupert Everett, Julia Roberts, Anouk Aimee, Tim Robbins, Kim Basinger, Richard E Grant, Forest Whitaker, Linda Hunt, Tracey Ullman, Lauren Bacall, and Stephen Rea all do their very best with the material. Yet jokes and satirical jabs fall flat at every turn, whether a running joke about stepping in dog excrement, or a literal emperor-has-no-clothes moment featuring naked supermodels on the catwalk.

## **Hook (1991)**



Credit: Tri-Star

I've written extensively elsewhere of my love for Spielberg's films, notably to discuss [seven times he changed cinema](#),

his more [underrated films](#), and in a highly personal piece on [E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial](#). But Spielberg has had his share of duds too, notably *1941*, *Always*, and *Hook*. Concerning the latter, it comes off as something of a mid-life crisis project, almost as though he's having a tantrum about moving on to more grown-up projects, kicking and screaming: "I won't make *Schindler's List*! You can't make me!"

If Spielberg wanted *Hook* to recapture the soaring spirit of *E.T.* then for the most part, he failed. Big names Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman do their best with the material, but I think a straighter adaptation of JM Barrie's timeless classic would have suited Spielberg better. The opening section in London is atmospheric, with menacing Hook scratches on the wall after the children are abducted, but once the action shifts to Neverland, it all gets rather pantomime and lacking in menace, not to mention carefully politically corrected (no Indians here).

Maddeningly, there is one absolutely superb sequence in *Hook*, when Peter Pan remembers his childhood in flashback. It is frustrating because it briefly captures the Edwardian melancholy of the play and again hints at what might have been, had Spielberg stuck to the original story. On the plus side, the one genuinely outstanding element of *Hook* is John Williams's score; one of his absolute best. The film is undeserving of it.

# Firefox (1982)



Credit: Warner Brothers

The last film on this list I've included as a guilty pleasure because I actually rather like it. However, *Firefox* is hardly Clint Eastwood at his best, either as actor or director. Based on Craig Thomas's bestselling novel, it tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who is seconded by the CIA and MI6 to steal a top-secret hypersonic fighter plane from the Soviet Union.

Leaving aside the fact that such an operation would have amounted to an act of war in real life, the film drags on interminably before the aircraft is finally half-inched, with dull, plodding pro-western speechifying, and not particularly suspenseful scenes of disguise and infiltration behind the Iron Curtain. It wasn't a critical success and didn't do great business at the box office. Yet I've always found it oddly entertaining, perhaps because I saw it at an impressionable age. Things do at least pick up once Eastwood has the damn plane in the air, and gets to battle



the inevitable second Firefox, with thought-controlled missiles and such (though crucially he has to “think in Russian”).

There’s a shortened cut (119 minutes instead of 137) that eliminates some of the more boring stretches, so if you’re curious, I’d recommend this version.

There you have it. I could have expanded this list to include other directors, but feel free to do so in the comments. What duds (if any) have been dropped by Terry Gilliam, Kathryn Bigelow, Peter Jackson, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Peter Weir, Francis Ford Coppola, Quentin Tarantino, David Fincher, Christopher Nolan, and so forth? Let me know.

I should add the above was sort-of inspired by [this article](#) from .

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