

Trailer Tracking: ‘Battleship’ ‘Men in Black III,’ ‘Frankenweenie’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 14, 2012 - 10:08am

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CHICAGO – As the movie industry starts to recover from the marketing disaster that was "John Carter" – a film with possibly the least effective trailers in recent history – it might be more important than ever for film studios to connect their with audiences with really, really kick-ass movie trailers.

Because, all other forms of media – be they traditional or social – aside, in my mind, there is nothing, NOTHING more effective for getting a person excited for an upcoming movie release than a really well-done movie trailer. Case in point: "Prometheus." 20th Century Fox is betting that audiences will be so knocked out by the trailer for "Prometheus", that they will be so completely won over by just a few well-edited glimpses of the visuals from Ridley Scott's first sci-fi movie since "Blade Runner", that they actually created a teaser trailer for the upcoming "Prometheus" trailer. That's right. They created a trailer FOR A TRAILER. If that doesn't speak to the implied power of the coming attraction, I don't know what does.

While the trailers we cover this month aren't as "trailer-for-a-trailer" worthy as "Prometheus", they do show off some of the best and worst qualities that previews have to offer. (You can find the best in Josh Brolin stealing focus from Will Smith and a boy lovingly hugging his dog. You can find the worst in... well, mostly in the "Battleship" trailer.)

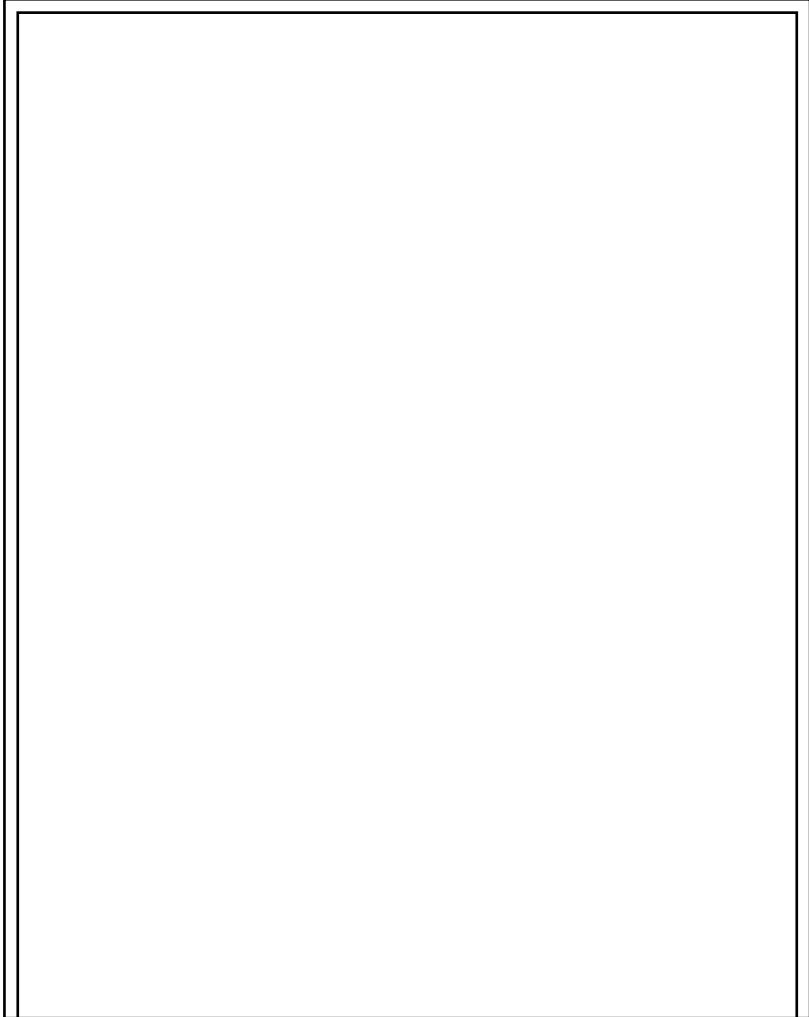
Take a look at our recent trailer breakdowns and decide for yourself whether these trailers do their artform justice.

Movie: “Battleship”

Best Parts of the Trailer: Realizing that Taylor Kitsch isn't the only guy from "Friday Night Lights" who got cast in the movie (you go, Jesse Plemons!); the video-game-esque alien body armor suits are kind of cool; the peg weapon hitting the battleship did, actually, remind me of the "Battleship game"

Worst Parts of the Trailer: Still looks like a poor man's Michael Bay film; Plot is still incoherent and odd; And, once again, no one ever, EVER utters the phrase "J-7, mother-****er!"

OUR TAKE: I reviewed the "Battleship" Super Bowl trailer in last month's "Trailer Tracking" and, to be frank, I wasn't exactly kind to it – if I remember correctly, the phrase "schizophrenic mess" turned up pretty early in the review.





Battleship
Photo credit: Universal

This new theatrical trailer for "Battleship" doesn't have the WTF cache of the earlier previews – the first trailer touted the ridiculous "Brooklyn Decker as the admiral's daughter" subplot and the Super Bowl trailer was an even bigger, louder mess. This trailer, however, is a much more calculated piece of movie-marketing collateral. It's less crazy, but it also seems to have a more obvious agenda than the other trailers. How so? Well, the most interesting thing about this new "Battleship" trailer is the timing of its release. It came out mere days after Taylor Kitsch's OTHER giant 2012 blockbuster, "John Carter", was declared an international flop by most of the world's press organizations. Having this trailer come out so early in the "John Carter Dies at the Box Office" news cycle does seem to be a very deliberate move on Universal's part. It's as if they were worried that all the bad "John Carter" press would eventually evolve into an "Is Taylor Kitsch's "Battleship" Now in Trouble?" conversation, so they decided to do a pre-emptive strike by very quickly releasing a new trailer and throwing some weight behind their extremely expensive summertime gamble.

The other aspect of the "Battleship" trailer that seems very calculated to me is the new emphasis on the mecha-suited alien creatures. I compared the alien armor to the video game "Halo" in my Super Bowl spot review, but now, it seems obvious that, perhaps, while this trailer is seemingly meant to distance "Battleship" from "John Carter," it might also be meant to more closely align "Battleship" with, what is sure to be one of the biggest success stories of 2012 – I'm, of course, speaking of the very recent release of one of the most anticipated (and sure to be best-selling) video games of the year, "Mass Effect 3". Gamers, back me up on this one, but don't those armored aliens look like they just stepped out of the Mass Effect universe? Maybe I'm just being a conspiracy theorist and am not giving Universal their due, but, to me, this trailer is working overtime to position itself as the next cool thing. When I watch this trailer, I see a movie begging audiences, "Please, PLEASE don't think of us as the next "John Carter"! We're MUCH more like "Transformers 3" or "Mass Effect 3" – you know, those MASSIVE success stories!"

Campaigning aside, is this over-eager "Battleship" trailer an improvement on past trailers? Kind of. It's way more focused than the past trailers and the newly emphasized alien mystery is a much more compelling hook than Taylor Kitsch trying to prove himself to Liam Neeson. The effects, while impressive, are still coming across like Michael Bay clones and this trailer did even give us "Battleship"'s version of "Armageddon"'s famous "asteroid the size of Texas" line – as the alien ships bomb Japan, we hear "The debris field from this is going to cover the entire hemisphere." We spend a lot of time with the alien weaponry – seeing how the glowing red balls of doom are formed – and, as I mentioned earlier, we do see a board-game-esque peg drill into a battleship and sink it, which is the only part of the trailer that really got a laugh out of me.

In my opinion, the BIG problem with the "Battleship" trailers so far is very similar to the problem "John Carter" had with their trailers. The "Battleship" trailers NEVER explain the central conceit of the movie. Just like the "John Carter" previews never told us who John Carter was or why we should give a damn about him, the "Battleship" trailers have never even come close to explaining how a guy from "Friday Night Lights" and an old-school battleship can stop an alien invasion of Earth. They spend 90% of their time showing us ridiculous "Transformers"-style world destruction and yet somehow we know that we're going to be asked to believe that the crew of a battleship is the planet's best chance for survival. HOW? Battleships are huge, hulking behemoths. They're not exactly the most maneuverable bleeding-edge tech Earth has to offer. And there's this huge elephant in the room every time I watch a "Battleship" trailer and a nasty voice in the back of my head says, "They don't actually think I'll believe that they can stop an advanced alien invasion with some naval know-how and screaming 'FIRE EVERYTHING!', do they?" That's just a level of ridiculous I can't handle. So, I dearly hope that the "Battleship" marketing team will continue to learn from the failings of "John Carter" and will realize that evoking "Transformers" and "Mass Effect 3" is not going to sell ANYONE on their movie. If they want people to give "Battleship" the benefit of the doubt, they very, very quickly need to make us understand WHY we should give a damn about Taylor Kitsch and his all-powerful battleship and shot of explosions and Rihanna aren't getting that job done.

TRAILER OUTLOOK: Such a mess, but, to their credit, it looks like a way more entertaining mess than “John Carter”

Movie: “Men in Black III”

Best Parts of the Trailer: Josh Brolin's Tommy Lee Jones impression is AMAZING; the retro production design in the old-school MIB offices; Bill Hader!

Worst Parts of the Trailer: None of the jokes land as hard as they probably should; certain parts seem less like “callbacks” and more like “recycled material”

OUR TAKE: I am a slightly unusual film geek, in that I really enjoyed both of the previous “Men in Black” movies. While people generally liked the first “MIB” and loathed the second, I find them both to be very affable, very rewatchable mainstream capers. There’s nothing edgy or groundbreaking about the “MIB” films, but there’s nothing wrong with that. They’re all about low-key riffing on sci-fi concepts, Barry Sonnenfeld’s slightly bent sense of humor, and the fantastic, note-perfect chemistry between Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones. I honestly have a hard time thinking of two other big-name actors who had such a successful (and unexpected) on-screen rapport. (If you want to see the opposite of the Smith-Jones chemistry, watch the dead-eyed, non-existent bond between Smith and Kevin Kline in “Wild Wild West.”)



Men in Black III
Photo credit: DreamWorks

The new “Men in Black III” trailer promises an equal mixture of new and familiar elements in this next trip into the “MIB” universe, and the result is a fairly balanced helping of hits and misses. While I thought the biggest downside to “Men in Black III” was going to be the limited screen time of Tommy Lee Jones – particularly since his chemistry with Smith is literally the most crucial element of the previous “MIB” films – I have to say that Josh Brolin, playing a young Jones in the past, makes a BIG impression in this trailer. His take on Jones’ deathly cool demeanor is dead-on perfect and NONE of the big Will Smith gags in the preview are half as funny as Brolin giving a clipped, deadpan “All right.” And, while Brolin is definitely the trailer’s all-star, to be fair, there are two HUGE outstanding questions about his role in “MIB III” – 1). Will he be able to make his Agent J into more than just a celebrity impression? and 2). Will he be able to replicate Jones’ chemistry with Will Smith? THAT is the most obvious potential Achilles Heel of “MIB III”. This is a franchise that, in the past, has been completely driven by the chemistry of its two leads. Brolin looks killer in the trailer, but, if he and Smith don’t gel, the movie is doomed.

As for the rest of the trailer, there’s some good and some bad. A lot of time is spent celebrating the franchise’s old reliable jokes – “Hey, it’s the de-neuralizer! Hey, it’s Tony Shaloub! Hey, it’s MIB Joke #348!” – but I think, to Sonnenfeld’s credit, the trailer does introduce some interesting new elements. First, there’s Brolin’s “Young Agent J”, and then there’s the whole time-travel murder mystery conceit, which, on its surface, sounds like a much more interesting plot than “MIB II”’s “missing princess” caper. While, as I mentioned, most of Will Smith’s jokes really floundered for me in this trailer, I do like how the new story elements introduce a whole new look to the franchise. “MIB II” looked EXACTLY like “MIB I” on a visual level. However, the whole time travel aspect introduces a lot of new visual texture to the “MIB world” – Will Smith jumping off the skyscraper to time jump, the retro “Mad Men” MIB offices, the classic New York scenery... even the scene where Brolin hands Smith an actual old-school revolver instead of the standard “space-gun” felt fun and new-ish in the context of “MIB.”

Does it look like the laugh-out-loud CGI comedy blockbuster of the year? No. (Particularly not with all the rumors of script problems and rewriting on the set.) But it does look like a solid, non-obnoxious sci-fi comedy and we just don't have enough of those lately. Color me skeptically optimistic.

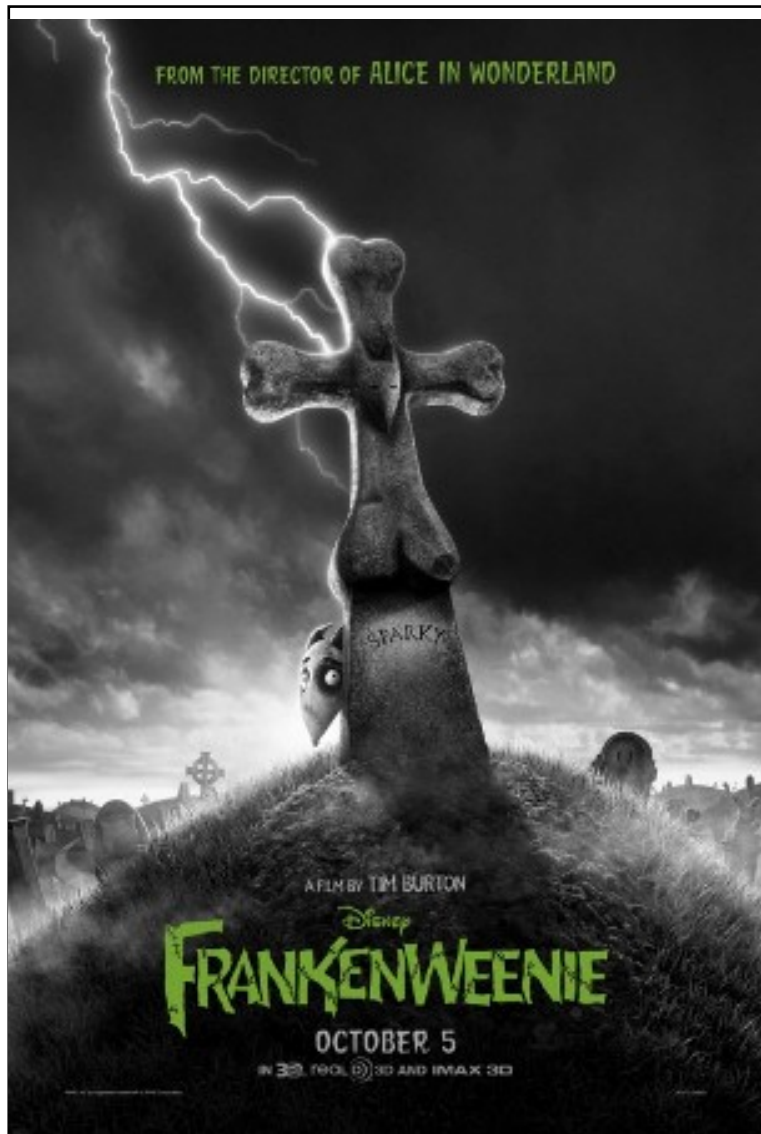
TRAILER OUTLOOK: Brolin gets the MVP trophy and upgrades my interest level from wary to interested.

Movie: "Frankenweenie"

Best Parts of the Trailer: Something about Tim Burton-style stop-motion animation feels warm and comfortable; the surprising level of honest emotion; the Bride of Frankenstein gag

Worst Parts of the Trailer: Not entirely sold on the black-and-white visuals; not sure what the story is after the dog comes back to life

OUR TAKE: One of the most amazing aspects of Tim Burton's fairly fantastic career is how he was able to become such a major force in revitalizing big-screen stop-motion animation and how he was able to help it become a viable and (at times) very commercially successful cinematic artform. In fact, every time you see a stop-motion animated film advertised nowadays, I think 90% of the filmgoing public just assumes that Tim Burton had something to do with it. (Granted, there still aren't that many stop-motion films being made, so Burton probably did have a hand in, literally, 60% of them.) Burton's stop-motion visual style has become so iconic that, even when his collaborators (like Henry Selick) go off to make their own projects, movies like "Coraline" or the upcoming "Paranorman", the results just seem to LOOK like Tim Burton films. (The only stop-motion pictures that don't look like they come from the Burton school of design are Aardman films, like "Wallace & Gromit", and maybe Wes Anderson's "Fantastic Mr. Fox.")



Frankenweenie
Photo credit: Disney

"Frankenweenie", Burton's newest stop-motion cartoon, based off his original 1984 live-action short, definitely LOOKS like a Tim Burton film, which comes with both positive and negative baggage. On the positive side, Burton's name is largely synonymous with a certain level of pedigree and quality, so there is a weight behind "Frankenweenie", an implied benefit of the doubt, that most other animated films have to work much harder to achieve. There are many moments in the "Frankenweenie" trailer that make you think of other Tim Burton films – "Look, him walking his dog looks like Jack and Zero from 'Nightmare Before Christmas'" or "Look, that tower on a hill next to a suburban neighborhood looks just like 'Edward Scissorhands'" – and that gives "Frankenweenie" a certain amount of cache by association.

However, I'd admit that I found the overwhelming Burton-ness of the "Frankenweenie" trailer a little on the dull side. It just feels very familiar, like we've gone down this territory before with "Nightmare Before Christmas" or "Corpse Bride." I'm a fan of Burton's work, but there's just a bit of a softball feel to "Frankenweenie", like the story is a little too easy and too in-his-wheelhouse to really be captivating. Even the black-and-white visuals seem like an easy choice for Burton – been there, done that in "Ed Wood" – and I'm actually a little worried that the muted monochrome color scheme might hurt the three-dimensionality of the stop-motion environments. (I would LOVE to be proved wrong on that one.)

Speaking of three-dimensionality, probably my favorite part of the "Frankenweenie" trailer is how open and emotionally honest the characters

are in such a short running time. I think it's actually a really brave choice to open the trailer with the acknowledgement of "this is a story about a boy who's best friend has just died." While "Battleship" blew up Tokyo and gave us award-winning actors shouting nonsense, "Frankenweenie" goes in COMPLETELY the other direction and gives us tears and some naked moments of emotion. And those are much more confident and ballsy choices than showing us Rihanna firing a big gun. While I might look at "Frankenweenie", roll my eyes, and think, "Great, ANOTHER macabre suburban fable," the level of emotional depth that Burton offers in a 2-minute kids' movie preview brings me back from my cynical depths and reminds me that, for the most part, a Tim Burton movie is a pretty safe bet.

TRAILER OUTLOOK: Very, very Tim Burton-esque. Almost painfully so. But that's probably a good thing.

By TOM BURNS

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

tom@hollywoodchicago.com [9]

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