

Chasing the Stars: Carmakers in Movies

This summer it's big thrills, big spills and lots of squealing tires as moviegoers experience some of the best car chase scenes on film.

by Ann Job

What a summer for car chases on the silver screen!

The Warner Bros. film, *The Matrix Reloaded*, sets new standards for car chase visual effects in what producer Joel Silver calls, "probably the most complicated car chase ever filmed."

Paramount Pictures' modern remake of *The Italian Job*—with little MINIs running amok on streets, sidewalks and stairs—refreshes memories of the 1969 classic *The Italian Job*, and is rekindling debate about the best car chases in movie history.

Universal Pictures' *2Fast 2Furious* builds a new base of car chase fans among young drivers this summer, with its portrayal of cops, gangs and the "tuner" crowd in the fast lane.

With so much sudden attention on cars and car chases at the movie theater, filmgoers might be surprised to learn just how much work goes into getting vehicles for some of these fast-paced action sequences and how a car, truck or SUV becomes a movie "star" that gets beat up, crashed and shot.

Yes, even in these days of computer graphics, movie producers often use the real thing—real cars and a mix of real and stunt drivers.



Car fans will relish the unusual efforts Cadillac made to get its vehicles to makers of *The Matrix Reloaded*.

Casting Call, of Sorts

Most times, Hollywood comes a callin'—to car companies, that is—as plans for a movie are confirmed. The movie folks make requests to use one or more of a carmaker's vehicles.



Mitsubishi vehicles debut in their first movie, *2Fast 2Furious*, with the Eclipse Spyder and Lancer Evolution.

This is how Mitsubishi's Eclipse Spyder and Lancer Evolution came to be featured in *2Fast 2Furious*, which is the sequel to 2001's *The Fast & The Furious*.

A cult film among young people who customize their vehicles and are in the "tuner" scene, *The Fast & The Furious* made a star out of actor Vin Diesel. In the sequel with Brian O'Conner sans Diesel, street racers again show off the performance and stylized bodies of their cars.

"Universal Pictures came and knocked on our door and said, 'We want you guys in our movie,'" said Greg Stahl, director of advertising at Mitsubishi Motors North America. "They were very interested in our brand because of our very young demographics and because we're very well known in the tuner crowd, and we're a multicultural brand."

Mitsubishi provided 12 cars for shooting—four Eclipse Spyders, four Lancers and four Lancer Evolutions, Stahl said, adding that was the extent of Mitsubishi's costs.

Car buffs take note: The Evolutions in the film actually were pieced-together models, not true Evolution Vllls, which only went on sale in the United States this year, according to Mitsubishi spokeswoman Janis Little.

Still, she said, stunt drivers were so impressed by the movie cars "they wanted to buy them."

Couldn't Substitute a Taurus

Sometimes, it's obvious which car should be in a movie.

Take the new MINI, starring in this year's *The Italian Job*.

Adapted from the 1960's film that showed police-driven Alfa Romeos struggling to catch robbers driving the original, inimitable MINIs, the new film depicts robbers trying to get their gold and escape in modern MINIs amidst the worst Los Angeles traffic jam ever.



MINI provided more than 30 cars for *The Italian Job*; however, only three MINIs—red, white and blue—can be recognized in the final cut.

In the movie, MINIs—the smallest car sold in America—careen down stairs, drive on side



To avoid pursuers, MINIs careen down stairs, drive on sidewalks and weave through subway tunnels.

and weave through subway tunnels. Mark Wahlberg, Edward Norton and Charlize Theron are among the actors.

"The car is obviously integral to the film," said Michael McHale, MINI spokesman. "They couldn't make the film with another car. It would be heresy."

He said the only cost to MINI was providing more than 30 cars. Moviegoers, however, are likely to recognize only three MINIs—one red, one white and one blue.

Wachowskis Visit Detroit

The selection of Cadillacs for *The Matrix Reloaded* went a bit differently.

Due to a longstanding marketing agreement between Cadillac's parent company, General Motors Corp., and Warner Bros., the automaker can signal its interest in participating in an upcoming studio film, said Susan Docherty, Escalade marketing director.

"We looked at Matrix as a brand, and it was very edgy, very bold and very unexpected," she said. "It clearly had the ability to separate itself [from other films] and was able to develop a cult-like following . . . From a timing standpoint, we knew our product assault would be at its height at Cadillac and this [movie placement] gave us an opportunity to pull the whole story together."

She added that the CTS and Escalade EXT appearances are intended to demonstrate "how the vehicles perform and Cadillac's renaissance."

The creators of the *Matrix* films, brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski, made the trip to Cadillac in Detroit to select the vehicles personally from among the Cadillac lineup, Silver said. "They had two [future] vehicles that the boys liked, the CTS and EXT . . . The cars had a sort of new feel to them when they saw them in 2000."

No Vehicles? No Problem

Car fans will relish the unusual effort Cadillac made to get the vehicles to the filmmakers.

Since CTS was about a year from production, the movie cars wound up being culled from the ranks of CTS prototypes. They didn't necessarily stand up to all the rough stuff in the movie, Silver said.

"One of the first shots we did, we snapped the axle on the CTS," he said. "We jumped kind of a curb, and these weren't real cars . . . and they really weren't designed for that kind of thing . . . We ended up doing a lot of repair work on those cars ourselves."



The *Matrix Reloaded* film crew used preproduction versions of the Cadillac CTS and EXT.

The EXTs were even more difficult for Cadillac to provide, because at the time they were needed for filming, they weren't yet in prototype stage.

David Schiavone, Cadillac product manager, wound up securing only two engineering prototypes as well as pieces of EXT sister vehicles, the Escalade and Chevrolet Avalanche.

It fell to Bill Deem, a former GM dealership mechanic who now has a vehicle prep business and is a stunt driver, to do the job of removing rear-end parts of Escalades and replacing them with rear-end parts of Avalanches. All the work was done in a Detroit area warehouse, with help from suppliers who custom fabricated some sheet metal components.

By Jan. 22, 2001, Cadillac shipped 14 CTS prototypes, 14 CTS interiors, 10 EXT prototypes and two EXT interiors to California. Another 50 GM vehicles were also provided as background vehicles, and filmmakers got engineering specs, math data and dimensional information about sheet metal components.

All in all, *The Matrix Reloaded* showcases GM's "largest product placement effort ever," the automaker said.

What Automakers Gain

Many in the auto industry credit BMW with showing how modern-day automakers can get maximum leverage out of a Hollywood appearance.

In the 1995 James Bond movie *GoldenEye*, actor Pierce Brosnan's car was a BMW Z3—a car that hadn't gone on sale yet as the movie debuted. BMW officials set a target of 5,000 Z3 roadster pre-orders off its Z3 publicity, which included the film and other promotions.

In the end, the company ended up with 10,000 pre-orders.

How? As part of an all-out marketing campaign, BMW tied the Z3's role as Bond's new car in the film to a special edition Z3 in the Neiman Marcus Christmas catalog, dealer movie premiere parties, even a press event in New York's Central Park where Brosnan drove up in a Z3.

However, each automaker sets different goals for its movie placements.

Cadillac's appearance in *The Matrix Reloaded*, comes as the luxury brand is trying to boost its image among young car buyers. What better place to be, Cadillac officials thought back in 2001, than in one of the Matrix trilogy movies? The first one, released in



1999, was a \$450 million blockbuster that attracted a hip, young audience fascinated by the detailed, high-tech visual effects that set new standards for action filmmaking.

"I believe it will be a great connection for Cadillac," Silver said. Added Grant Hill, executive producer, "This is the ultimate Cadillac commercial."

Docherty noted Cadillac is quite selective about the movies where it gives filmmakers free cars. However, "we don't want product placement for product placement sake," she said, adding the intent now is to make sure car appearances are "strategic" and fit with Cadillac goals.

2Fast 2Furious got the okay for free cars because the film matches well with Mitsubishi customers who are youthful and multicultural, he said. Stahl was also aware the first *Fast & Furious* movie was successful at the box office.

"This is really the first movie we have ever done," he said, adding that in the past Mitsubishi "walked away from" some filmmakers' requests.

He predicted: "When we look back at this in three to five years, it will be viewed as a great case study . . . We think this is a great return on investment."