

THE EPIC SCALE

Sweeping vistas, massive monsters, giant casts and mega bucks: Total Film weighs up the 18 most monumentally epic movies of all time.

WORDS MATT GLASBY



The biggest ever crowd scene

GANDHI 1982

1 As a director, Richard Attenborough didn't really do small. His 1969 debut, *Oh! What A Lovely War*, essentially re-enacted WW1 in the guise of *Oliver!*, while his follow-up, *Young Winston* (1972), took 157 minutes to track Mr Churchill to the ripe old age of 26. But he really surpassed himself with this 1982 classic – and he needed to – for not only does it depict the forging of modern India, it dramatises 50 years in the life of Mohandas Gandhi (Ben Kingsley), a man who changed the world. “The only kind of epics that work,” believed Attenborough, “are intimate epics.”

Although it begins with the disclaimer, “No man’s life can be encompassed in one telling. There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, each person who helped to shape a lifetime...” Attenborough’s 183-minute behemoth gives it a bloody good try. It’s such a weighty subject, director Gabriel Pascal died trying to make it in the 1950s, while David Lean failed several times, moving on to the not-exactly-bijou *Lawrence Of Arabia* instead. Attenborough himself worked on the film for 18 years, and eventually his vision was rewarded with eight Oscars, including Best Director and Best Picture.

And what vision. For Gandhi’s funeral, 100,000 Indian extras were hired, but 200,000 more showed up and worked for free – an astonishing number that bests the competition by a factor of a hundred. You can do wonders with CGI these days, but you can’t beat the raw spectacle of half a continent beefing up your background, even if the finished scene only lasts two minutes – roughly one extra for every 0.0004 seconds screen time.

SEE ALSO *Intolerance* (1916), *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *Metropolis* (1927), *Cimarron* (1931), *Ben-Hur* (1959).



The most expensive setpiece

THE MATRIX RELOADED 2003

2 Directed by the Andy and Larry (now Lana) Wachowski, 1999’s jaw-dropping sci-fi flick *The Matrix* came out of nowhere to gross more than \$460m worldwide. The problem the super-secretive brothers faced when shooting the sequels (back to back, no less) was how to top the original’s space-bending SFX. What they came up with, *The Matrix Reloaded*’s ‘Burly Brawl’ sequence, cost \$40m (approximately half the budget of the original film) and blew ‘bullet-time’ out of the water.

Named in honour of ‘The Burly Man’, a script glimpsed on the desk of the Coen brothers’ character Barton Fink, this extraordinary smackdown shows Neo (Keanu Reeves) fighting hundreds upon hundreds of Agents (all played by Hugo Weaving) who multiply into a mob, then a melee. As Neo bounces off the brickwork, swings a tetherball post and whirligigs through the air, it’s not so much a fight as an extremely bellicose Quidditch match. Said SFX guru John Gaeta: “The point is not to knock you over with a visual trick. The point is to be able to construct events that are so complex, in terms of what human bodies need to do, that the total ‘effect’ is impossible choreography: ‘My God! It looks real, but it just can’t be.’”

In which case, bingo. To bring the sequence to life, Gaeta and his team turned the decommissioned Naval Air Station Alameda in California into a huge motion-capture arena. But rather than using lots of cameras to record Reeves and Weaving fighting (as they did in bullet-time), they scanned every piece of information, from the actors’ expressions to the fibres of their clothes, into computers, creating a 3D scene by a process called Universal Capture. They then created a virtual viewpoint that could whizz through any aspect of the action as it unfolded. Or, in other words, they faked the actors, then they faked the camera. In fact, once Neo and Smith face off, everything that happens after is, in its own way, computer-generated. The result is an Uncanny Valley of virtuoso showmanship that stops viewers, and the movie itself, in their tracks as if to say: after this, anything is possible.

SEE ALSO *Pearl Harbour* (2001), *Swordfish* (2001), *I Am Legend* (2007).

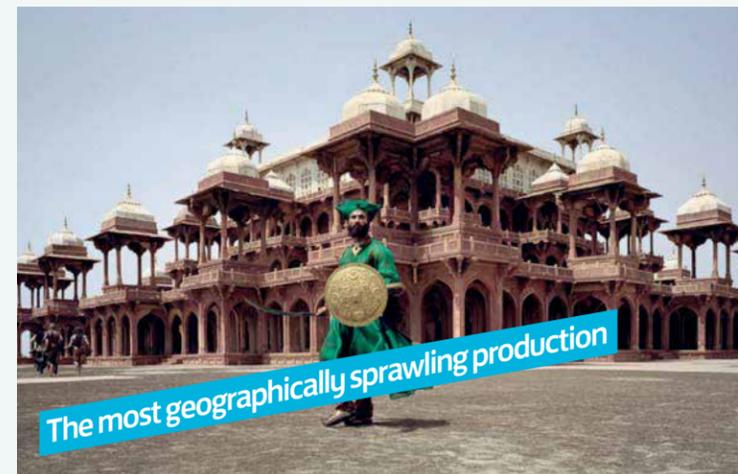


The most extravagant folly

CLEOPATRA 1963

3 Disney’s *Mars Needs Moms* may have lost more money (\$130,503,621); *Battlefield Earth* more credibility, but none failed so publicly as this giddily immoderate \$44m Elizabeth Taylor vehicle, the only highest-grossing of the year ever to make a loss – of \$18m! The extravagant, stop-start production was mounted twice, once in London under Rouben Mamoulian (yielding no usable footage), then again in Rome under Joseph L. Mankiewicz because the English weather encumbered Taylor’s recovery from pneumonia. “I really don’t remember much about *Cleopatra*,” she said. “There were a lot of other things going on.” Too right. Taylor embarked on a high-profile (and much frowned-upon) affair with co-star Richard Burton, Mankiewicz delivered a six-hour cut and got sacked – then re-hired – and his lumbering colossus almost bankrupted 20th Century Fox. At least the English sets were re-used, in *Carry On Cleo*.

SEE ALSO *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), *Cutthroat Island* (1995), *Town & Country* (2001), *John Carter* (2013).



The most geographically sprawling production

THE FALL 2006

4 After the critical kicking his visually overblown *The Cell* received, director Tarsem Singh went back to basics for the follow-up, about a sick stuntman (Lee Pace) spinning an epic tale to a little girl (Catinca Untaru) from his hospital bed. However, Tarsem’s idea of ‘basics’ does differ slightly from everyone else’s. As a celebrated advertising director, his work took him to exotic locations across the world, where he’d film segments of *The Fall* with his commercials crew, on his own dollar. The result is a sumptuous, free-wheeling fantasy, shot on the fly in a carbon-footprint-shaming 20 countries from France to China over four years. Still, the divisive helmer couldn’t please everyone. “Some people thought it was the best thing since sliced bread,” he said. “Some people thought it was absolute shit.” Full marks for effort, though.

SEE ALSO Bond films (1962-the present) *The Endless Summer* (1966), *Around The World In 80 Days* (1956).

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The most indulgent set design

'Weighing 40,000lbs and measuring 365ft in diameter, the 40ft floating set was moored off the coast of Hawaii'

WATERWORLD 1995

5 Known as 'Kevin's Gate' and 'Fishtar' after two famous flops, this wishy-washy action flick, directed by Kevin Reynolds and starring Kevin Costner, is set in the distant future after the polar icecaps have melted. Water has been the undoing of many ambitious productions, from *Jaws* to *Titanic*, and so it proved here, with costs swelling from \$100m to an estimated \$175m. There are no hard-and-fast rules for making a hit film, but here's two decent guidelines: when Roger Corman predicts budget problems (he passed on the script in the 1980s, worried it would cost as much as \$10m), listen. Another might be: don't build your own island. Weighing 40,000lbs and measuring 365ft in diameter, the 40ft-tall floating set was moored off the coast of Hawaii (so it could be towed out to sea for wide shots) and required so much steel that more had to be flown in from California. There were no toilets, so cast and crew had to be ferried to a nearby barge, heavy winds constantly threw it out of position and, supposedly, part of it sank completely. That wasn't the end of the Kevins' troubles though: Costner and his co-stars nearly drowned, his stunt double – a famous surfer – was briefly lost at sea, the score was junked and when Joss Whedon (among others) was flown in for rewrites he called it 'seven weeks of hell'. Versions of the set can be seen in Universal Studios theme parks around the world where, so far, they've managed to stay afloat. SEE ALSO *Intolerance* (1916), *The 10 Commandments* (1956), *Titanic* (1997), *Stalingrad* (2013).



The biggest creature ever created

KING KONG 1976

8 Close call this one, but clinching victory by a (big furry) head from the *Jurassic Park* animatronics is Carlo Rambaldi's mechanical King Kong. A whopper at 40ft tall and 6.5tons, it was also something of a flopper, costing \$1.7m, taking four and a half months to build and barely cameoing in the film because it continually conked out. Separate mechanical arms were created to fondle Jessica Lange, and when producer Dino De Laurentiis visited the set, the operators stuck out Kong's hand and extended the middle finger. Much merriment was had, until they realised it was stuck in that position. Kong 2's stats are all the more impressive when you consider the fact that his forefather, the 1933 model, measured just 18in, and his successor (Andy Serkis in Peter Jackson's 2005 film) about 5ft 7in. SEE ALSO *Jaws* (1976), *Aliens* (1986), *Jurassic Park* trilogy (1993-2001), *Free Willy* (1993).



The most spectacular explosion

TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY 1991

9 Everything about James Cameron's *Terminator* sequel was bigger, faster, better – this time he could even afford to show the apocalypse. But despite the leaps in CGI that birthed Robert Patrick's morphing T1000, it's this simple model shot that lingers longest in the memory. Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) dreams she's watching her younger self in a playground with her son. Then the sky flashes white, bodies disintegrate and LA vaporises. After studying real footage of nuclear damage, the filmmakers created a scale model, then blew it to smithereens with pressurised air (the debris was made of Shredded Wheat), taking two days to re-set. It was worth it. Nuclear laboratory workers called it the most accurate depiction of a blast ever created for a fictional motion picture. Who are we to argue? SEE ALSO *Zabriskie Point* (1970), *Star Wars* (1977), *Die Hard* (1988), *Independence Day* (1994), *The Dark Knight* (2008).



The most impactful production

THE LORD OF THE RINGS TRILOGY 2001-2003

6 Time was, New Zealand was something of a niche concern in world cinema. Then Peter Jackson's unprecedented *TLOTR* trilogy completely redrew the map, leaving a legacy based on much more than just pop-cultural kudos. Jackson's Weta Digital is now one of the foremost VFX house in the world, the Kiwi screen industry is worth an estimated NZD\$3bn and Tourism New Zealand estimates the country's seen a 50 per cent increase in visitors. Tourists can do an official tour of the Hobbiton set at Matamata, explore Rivendell (Kaitoke Regional Park) or Lothlorian (Fernside Lodge), among other stunning cine-vistas. They can even get a 'Welcome To Middle-earth' passport stamp at customs. All of which is only fitting for a film about a little guy venturing out into the big, bad world and coming home a hero. SEE ALSO *The Matrix* (1999), *Life Of Pi* (2013).



The most ambitious war scene

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN 1998

7 Steven Spielberg called WW2 'the most significant event of the last 100 years', and *SPR*'s unforgettable first 15 minutes hammer home its horrors to Oscar-winning effect. A re-staging of the 1944 Omaha Beach landings, the scene shows Tom Hanks and his soldiers spilling out on the Normandy shores, only to be ripped apart by gunfire. Costing \$12m and featuring 12 genuine WW2 landing craft, the sequence was shot in Wexford in Ireland, and used 1,500 army extras (plus members of a local re-enactment group playing the Germans). In a decision of questionable taste, but maximum effect, local amputees were drafted in to have their limbs blown off anew. Ultimately, it's horrifying details such as the soldier looking for his severed arm that count as much as the scope. SEE ALSO *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *TLOTR: The Two Towers* (2002).



The largest menagerie

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE 1936

10 Based on Tennyson's epic poem, Michael 'Casablanca' Curtiz's Crimean yarn features rampaging elephants, tiger hunts and a vast equine supporting cast. Star Errol Flynn called it 'physically the toughest picture I ever made', but it was much worse for the horses. The climactic Battle Of Balaclava depicts hundreds of British cavalry troops cantering across the plains only to be felled by Russian guns. Obscenely – but not, yet, illegally – the ground was set with wires to ensure the horses tripped on command, breaking their legs and killing dozens. Flynn complained and Congress was forced to ensure animal safety in future films. Curtiz's battle cry of, 'Bring on the empty horses!' became the title of co-star David Niven's excellent – and epically revealing – second autobiog. SEE ALSO *The Birds* (1963), *War And Peace* (1967), *Waterloo* (1970).



The longest ever runtime

HEIMAT II 1992

11 Art projects aside – *Modern Times Forever* by Danish artists Superflex lasted 240 hours (10 whole days) – the longest film shown commercially in its entirety is Edgar Reitz's 25 hour, 32 minute *Heimat II*, which premiered in Munich in September 1992. Though made for TV and comprising 13 separate episodes, it qualified for the Guinness World Record, taking 557 days to film and featuring a 2,143-page screenplay. A sequel to the popular (and comparatively brisk 15 hours, 24 minutes) *Heimat* (1984), *HII* follows 71 overlapping characters through the shifting landscape of '60s Germany, with each episode covering a period of one to two years. It certainly must have felt that way to anyone who sat through it. SEE ALSO *Haw Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1977), *Shoah* (1985), *Resan* (1987).

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EPIC
BLOCKBUSTER
PREVIEW

The most expansive standalone score

BEN-HUR 1959

12 William Wyler's Biblical slave drama, a remake of the 1925 silent film, cost a (then) whopping \$15.17m, won 11 Oscars and starred Charlton Heston. But it required some equally muscular music to ensure that its 212 minutes raced by like a spiked chariot. Step forward MGM composer Miklós Rózsa who melded Greek and Roman tunes of the period to create a stirring piece of bombast, echoes of which can be heard in the work of John Williams and other next-gen talents. For the 2.5 hour score, Rózsa directed the 100-piece MGM Symphony Orchestra over 12 recording sessions lasting 72 hours, winning his third Oscar for his efforts. It was released as three LPs, then later as the shorter *Ben-Hur Suite*. **SEE ALSO** *Gone With The Wind* (1939), *The Fall Of The Roman Empire* (1964), *Wyatt Earp* (1994).



The longest single shot

RUSSIAN ARK 2002

13 After Hitchcock's *Rope*, shot in 10 short takes but intended to look continuous, an arms race began to see how long filmmakers could hold shots without the narrative collapsing. Sometimes they even cheated with invisible cuts. The antidote? Alexander Sukurov's historical drama consists of one unbroken 96-minute shot. Dazzlingly choreographed, it follows the POV of the camera (essentially a ghost) as it glides through Russia's Winter Palace, interacting with and eavesdropping on Tsar Nicholas II, Joseph Stalin and others from a 300-year period. Mike Figgis' 90-minute *Timecode* pulled the same trick using a split-screen device, but it was shot on VHS, so Sukurov's staggering achievement seems unlikely to be surpassed. **SEE ALSO** *Rope* (1948), *GoodFellas* (1990), *Snake Eyes* (1998), *Timecode* (2000), *Children Of Men* (2006), *La Casa Munda* (2010).



The most remote location

RAPA NUI 1994

15 Filmmakers have long travelled to the ends of the earth to find the perfect location, but *Rapa Nui* is – almost literally – off the charts. Directed by *Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves*' Kevin Reynolds and co-produced by Kevin Costner, it was set and shot among the indigenous tribes of Easter Island, one of the most remote places in the world. "That's probably the most difficult picture I've ever done," Reynolds conceded. With only one flight from mainland Chile (3,512km away) per week, "There were times we ran out of food," recalls the director. "It was very bad." Critics more or less agreed. For their next extravaganza, the Kevins moved closer to home, to Hawaii. The movie? *Waterworld*. **SEE ALSO** *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *The Dead* (2012), *South Of Sanity* (2012).

ALLSTAR, MOVIESTORE

LAST ACTION HERO 1993

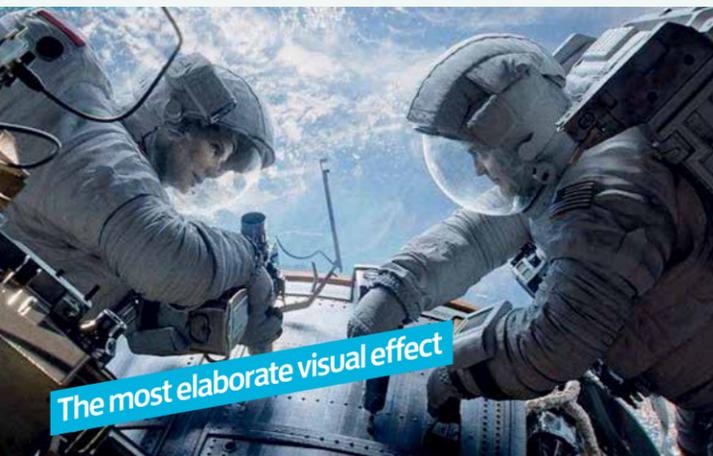
16 The makers of this winking, limping mega-turkey didn't do anything by halves, including an ad campaign so OTT even Arnie's Jack Slater character might have urged caution. As well as the usual tie-ins – a \$12m Burger King promotion, a \$5m Mattel toy line, pinball machines, video games, beach towels, trading cards – Columbia Pictures paid to have a *Last Action Hero* poster placed on the side of a space shuttle. Unfortunately, as often happens in space travel, the launch was delayed until almost two months after the film came out. This wasn't the only gargantuan mis-step: a 75ft balloon in Times Square depicting Slater holding sticks of dynamite had to be re-designed because, three days previously, the World Trade Centre had been bombed. It's possible that Columbia knew the film was terrible but, faced with an immovable 18 June release date (just one week after the equally well-promoted, but crucially non-shit, *Jurassic Park*), had no choice but to hype the hell out of it. All the same, there is such a thing as bad press, or at least too much press. The media were primed to rip the film apart, and such was the expectation of catastrophe that Columbia sent round a press release 'to cut off the endless string of calls from around the world on the very same tired subject', swearing, 'We will absolutely make our date on *Last Action Hero*'. The film tanked, and it remains a testament to Hollywood's unofficial adage: if you're going to fail, fail big. **SEE ALSO** *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999), *Cloverfield* (2009), *Tron: Legacy* (2010).



CLASSIC EPICS

The most elaborate marketing campaign

'Columbia Pictures paid to have a poster of the film placed on the side of a space shuttle'



The most elaborate visual effect

GRAVITY 2013

14 The 12-minute unbroken opening shot that leaves Sandra Bullock and George Clooney stranded in space was, like the rest of Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, a technical achievement of which Nasa would be proud. Tim Webber of London's Framestore VFX unit estimated that 80 per cent of the film was CG (*Avatar* was just 60 per cent). Besides the actors' faces, everything you see in this first scene is computer-generated, but the filmmakers still pioneered new ways to shoot and light the actors in Zero-G. "The technology involved is the worst possible scenario of animation and a live-action shoot," said Cuarón who, four-and-a-half years after dreaming up this simple movie, received a much-deserved Best Director Oscar. **SEE ALSO** *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), *The Abyss* (1989), *Avatar* (2009), *Inception* (2010).



The largest unfinished project

NAPOLEON 1970

17 Kubrick hastily referred to his pet project as 'the best film ever made'. If only. In the late '60s/early '70s, he spent years amassing research, reading more than 500 books and watching every film ever made about the subject. His plan was to dramatise Napoleon's *entire* life, reasoning, "If you have a truly interesting film, it doesn't matter how long it is". The master envisaged thousands of extras for the battle scenes, even taking samples of mud from the real Waterloo to plausible locations. Over the years, David Hemmings, Ian Holm and Jack Nicholson were all considered as stars (and, post-mortem, Spielberg, Scorsese and Mann have shown interest in directing). Sadly spiralling costs and rival films scuppered it, and the 'best film ever made' remained in its creator's head. **SEE ALSO** Sergio Leone's *Leningrad*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis*, Paul Verhoeven's *Crusade*, Mira Nair's *Shantaram*.



The most audacious historical re-creation

GLADIATOR 2000

18 The swords-and-sandals genre had been languishing in the VHS bargain bin since its 1960s heyday but Ridley Scott's opus revived it in style, paving the way for the likes of *TLOTR*, *300* and *Game Of Thrones*. Deeming the original Colosseum 'too small' for his needs, Scott set about rebuilding Rome, a process which took way more than a day. The filmmakers burned down a forest in Surrey, built a 30,000-seat arena in Morocco and a replica of ancient Rome in Malta, including a 53ft, \$1m Colosseum of plaster and plywood (the other two-thirds were added in digitally). That wasn't the end of the SFX skulduggery. When Oliver Reed died during filming, they recreated him too. **SEE ALSO** *Spartacus* (1960), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *Braveheart* (1995), *300* (2006). **14**