

When it comes to impact, Ridley Scott is always aiming high. A maximalist at heart, Scott wants his movies to feel like event experiences. When it comes to epic cinema, a Napoleon biopic should tick the boxes. This is a man who still divides opinion, as either a master tactician trying to recapture France's honour and glory or as a despotic warmonger responsible for the deaths of millions of Frenchmen. He could also be both. With an outsized legacy, historical significance and a military career spanning more than 80 wars, Napoleon fits with Scott's sensibilities for spectacle. The British filmmaker restages six of these conflicts in grand set-pieces that dazzle and amaze. They are visually arresting as throngs of infantry and cavalry swarm the battlefield, a sumptuous tapestry of dirt and death. Napoleon's victory over his foes at the Battle of Austerlitz is particularly dramatic as bodies and streaks of blood shoot through the water as the ice above drowns them in their graves. You cannot watch these moments and fault the execution of Scott's vision with his frequent collaborator cinematographer Dariusz Wolski composing frames that could hang in the Louvre. It's a devastating portrait of victory. When it comes to lavish battle porn, Napoleon serves it up. And the six conflicts in the film, starting with the Siege of Toulon to the Battle of Waterloo, charts his growth as a military leader. In the first, Napoleon is nervous, almost quivering, as he tries to overcome his inner doubts of himself as a "Corsican ruffian" with poor hand-to-hand combat skills. By the time it ends with Waterloo, his hubris has turned to exhaustion and resignation. If the movie had lurched from one battle to another, it might have been a more effective film. Instead, they are just the highpoints in an inconsistent piece that is far too long for what it is, not what it could've been. That's the thing with long run times, isn't it? The subject, the story strokes and the emotional character arc could have sustained two hours and 38 minutes but when a movie falters on several fronts including clunky dialogue, you really start to feel the length. Napoleon wavers, a lot. Scott's direction of Joaquin Phoenix is discordant. The characterisation rather than the character is often erratic. He's petulant one minute and sombre the next, and there's no connective tissue or overall cohesion. You never grasp Napoleon's true motivations, what drives him to conquer and what made him such a military genius until he wasn't. Napoleon feels like it has chapters out of a strait-laced biography but not the whole book. It's missing the why and the why is crucial in a biopic because without it, you don't care about the person who has to carry the film. It's also difficult to care about Empress Josephine (Vanessa Kirby) who seems to exist purely to pine for or be frustrated with Napoleon. She is reduced to their "great love" and nothing more. It's even more disappointing when you have someone of Kirby's calibre. What remains is a film that is emotionally distancing and sometimes perfunctory. And this is not a rarity for Scott, one of the most celebrated filmmakers and yet has a long list of duds including his most recent effort, *House of Gucci*. But, and it's a big but, those battle sequences are breathtaking – a marvel of craft and filmmaking that elevates Napoleon and saves it from being relegated to the discards pile of cinema history.