

Hollywood FX

Filmmakers have progressed a long way from the early use of those rear projection scenes. We laugh at those now but Hollywood FX had to start somewhere. Today, directors can call on the latest state of the art technology to help them tell their story. Some people think that there is an over reliance on special effects, to the detriment of story and characterization. New techniques have had the most impact on historical epics, science fiction and animation.

Matte painted backgrounds and miniature models served movies well for a long time, enabling futuristic movies such as Fritz Lang's Metropolis. A combination of miniatures and stop motion animation made King Kong from 1933, a landmark in Hollywood FX. Ray Harryhausen was the effects wizard who made the fantastic look real, in movies that included Jason and the Argonauts and The Golden Voyage of Sinbad. War movies that needed sea battle footage used miniature models in huge water tanks. This, and a method known as traveling matte, created the splitting of the Red Sea scene in The Ten Commandments. No miracle was beyond the power of special effects gurus.

Further development came when effects supervisor Douglas Trumbull invented new techniques for the final voyage in Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. The hallucinogenic images raised the bar for others to follow. Director George Lucas rose to the challenge and astounded audiences with Star Wars in 1977. His team invented a new computer controlled camera that improved repeated camera motion and widescreen shots. Lucas then formed Industrial Light and Magic, the company that has pioneered Hollywood FX ever since.

Today, we are used to the idea of films being shot with a blue screen and the background being added later. Computer Graphics Imaging (CGI) dominates the scene now. Any object or person can be manipulated by the computer and mixed in with the live action. This method was put to great use in Spielberg's Jurassic Park and James Cameron's Terminator 2: Judgment Day. The effects team at Pixar has introduced it to their full length animations, such as Toy Story. The days of laboriously hand painting each frame of animation are just about gone. The Weta workshop in New Zealand has built a reputation as one of the best special effects companies, especially since the success of the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Effects will continue to advance now that the genie of technology is out of the bottle. Hollywood FX has made the return of the epic movie possible. It would have been cost prohibitive to build a mock up of the Coliseum in Gladiator. Russell Crowe fights the lions in a CGI virtual world.

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Category: 2006-12 File: hollywood-fx-23_utf8.txt

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