

EPIC FILMS

(often Historical)

● **Epic Films** often take an historical or imagined event, mythic, legendary, or heroic figure, and add an extravagant setting and lavish costumes, accompanied by grandeur and spectacle and a sweeping musical score. Epics, costume dramas, historical *dramas*, *war film* epics, medieval romps, or 'period pictures' are tales that often cover a large expanse of time set against a vast, panoramic backdrop. In an episodic manner, they follow the continuing adventures of the hero(s), who are presented in the context of great historical events of the past.

Epics are historical films that recreate past events. They are expensive and lavish to produce, because they require elaborate and panoramic settings, on-location filming, authentic period costumes, inflated action on a massive scale and large casts of characters. *Biopic (biographical) films* are often less lavish versions of the epic film.

Epics often rewrite history, suffering from inauthenticity, fictitious recreations, excessive religiosity, hard-to-follow details and characters, romantic dreamworlds, ostentatious vulgarity, political correctness, and leaden scripts. Accuracy is sometimes sacrificed: the chronology is telescoped or modified, and the political/historical forces take a back seat to the personalization and ideological slant of the story (i.e., the 'poetic license' of Oliver Stone's controversial **JFK (1991)** immediately comes to mind).

Epics often share elements of the more elaborate *adventure* films genre and swashbuckler subgenre (e.g., the Robin Hood tale of ★ **The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938)**). They may be combined with other genre types too, including:

- epic/historical *westerns* (i.e., **Cimarron (1930)**, **Dances with Wolves (1990)**)
- epic *science-fiction* (i.e., ★ **Star Wars (1977)**)
- epic/historical *dramas* (i.e., Bernardo Bertolucci's **The Last Emperor (1987)**)
- epic *war films* (i.e., **The Longest Day (1962)**)
- unconventional epics (i.e., Robert Altman's ★ **Nashville (1975)**)
- auteur epics (i.e., Coppola's ★ **Apocalypse Now (1979)**, Warren Beatty's period film **Reds (1981)**, and theatrical director Julie Taymor's adaptation of Shakespeare's **Titus (1999)** (Andronicus) - her debut film with innovative production design)

Epics have existed since the earliest days of American cinema, from D. W. Griffith's ground-breaking ★ **The Birth of a Nation (1915)**, to the giant Civil War epic and Best Picture winner ★ **Gone With The Wind (1939)**, to the fairly-recent ★ **Schindler's List (1993)**, **Titanic (1997)**, and Ridley Scott's revamped 'sword and sandal' epic **Gladiator (2000)**. Irreverent spoofs of Biblical films have also emerged, such as **The Life of Brian (1979)**, with the Monty Python cast.

Epics are often called *costume dramas*, since they emphasize the trappings of a period setting: historical pageantry, costuming and wardrobes, locale, spectacle, decor and a sweeping visual style. They often transport viewers to other worlds or eras: ancient times, biblical times, the Middle Ages, the Victorian era, or turn-of-the-century America. Unlike true historical epics, *period films* choose a specific historical period, and then superimpose fictional characters or events into the setting.

Two of the Earliest Epics from Italy: Quo Vadis? and Cabiria

Along with Enrico Guazzoni's epic **Quo Vadis? (1912, It.)** - often considered the *first* successful feature-length motion picture and one of the first films with over two hours running time, the influential three-hour Italian silent film from Giovanni Pastrone, **Cabiria (1914, It.)**, was an early example of spectacular and monumental epic film-making. It laid the pattern and groundwork for future big-budget feature-length films (by the likes of D.W. Griffith - for his **Judith of Bethulia (1914)**, ★ **The Birth of a Nation (1915)**, and later his Babylonian sequences in ★ **Intolerance (1916)** - and Cecil B. DeMille). Its story of 3rd century BC Ancient Rome included sequences of the eruption of Mt. Etna and Hannibal's crossing of the Alps with elephants (with an early example of tracking shots). The landmark film was shot on location in North Africa, Sicily and the Italian Alps. It was also the first film to be screened at the White House.

Silent Epics of D.W. Griffith:

The first great category of cinematic epics are the *silent epics*. The first American epic was early cinematic pioneer D. W. Griffith's Biblical spectacle **Judith of Bethulia** (1914), a little known four-reel feature film weaving together two Apocryphal stories about the 40-day Assyrian siege of the walled Judean city of Bethulia. Griffith's most influential and complex film, noted for its technical virtuosity and dynamic editing (although controversial for its southern point of view) was the first blockbuster film ★ **The Birth of a Nation** (1915). It reproduced the Civil War and Reconstruction Periods (including various battles, Lincoln's assassination, and the aftermath) and told of the war's effects upon two families (the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons) with a specific ideological slant that distorted its historical veracity. This almost three-hour film's screenplay was based upon Thomas Dixon's novel and play *The Clansman*.



The next Griffith film was another silent epic: ★ **Intolerance** (1916), that studied the effects of injustice and intolerance in four separate yet inter-connected and parallel stories in different time periods (its Babylonian sequence with massive sets is still remarkable). Its theme of "Love's struggle throughout the ages" and its passionate plea for tolerance was a response to his *Birth of a Nation* critics. Griffith's **Orphans of the Storm** (1921) was set against the backdrop of pre-Revolutionary France, and followed the paths of two sisters (the Gish sisters) who were separated and raised in different environments - one by aristocratic nobles, the other by thieving peasants.

Silent Epics of Cecil B. De Mille: The Biblical Epic Subgenre



Griffith's directorial counterpart, who specialized in extravagant epics throughout his entire career spanning both the silent and sound eras, was film showman Cecil B. De Mille. De Mille began his early film career with a series of silent Biblical or religious epics - a specific subgenre. These 'swords-and-sandals' films, with a strong religious viewpoint, were set during Roman times in the ancient world, and were noted for casts of thousands in crowd scenes.

His two-part silent version of **The Ten Commandments** (1923) included spectacular special effects for the parting of the Red Sea. This film foreshadowed the advent of future De Mille spectacles. He followed *The Ten Commandments* with **King of Kings** (1927), a beautifully-lavish yet reverential story of the life of Christ with a climactic resurrection scene (in color) and ascension. [*King of Kings* was re-released in 1931 with a synchronized musical score.]

Other Silent Era Epics:

Director Fred Niblo spent millions and two years to create the most expensive film of its time - MGM's silent-era **Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ** (1926), that starred Ramon Novarro and Francis Bushman as rivals Ben-Hur and Messala, respectively. The film included two colossal sequences: the sea galley battle with pirates and the famous chariot-race. Rex Ingram's anti-war film **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse** (1921), a star-making vehicle for Rudolph Valentino, was about two Argentinian brothers who ended up fighting on different sides in WWI. A non-Biblical epic of the silent era was Erich Von Stroheim's monumental masterpiece titled ★ **Greed** (1924), a severely-edited tale about the corruptive influences of avarice on a San Francisco dentist, his wife and an associate.



Raoul Walsh's imaginative Arabian Nights fantasy **The Thief of Bagdad** (1924) starred Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. with magical special effects including flying carpets and a giant genie. King Vidor's epic war film ★ **The Big Parade** (1925) told the heart-wrenching tale of the love between a French peasant girl and an American doughboy fighting WWI in Europe. Russian director Sergei Eisenstein's silent masterpiece **The Battleship Potemkin** (1925) portrayed the 1905 revolution through a microscopic view of a mutinous uprising aboard a Russian battleship. Its pioneering montage/editing sequences in the bloody Odessa Steps sequence changed filmmaking forever.

MGM - Epic Maker:

In the mid-1930s, MGM won the Best Picture with its adapted version of Charles Nordhoff's and James Norman Hall's historical non-fiction novel, the sea-adventure epic [Mutiny on the Bounty \(1935\)](#). It featured on-location shooting in Tahiti, and Charles Laughton as the definitive Captain Bligh and Clark Gable as Fletcher Christian (both nominated for Best Actor, along with co-star Franchot Tone). It was MGM's most expensive film production since their **Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1926)**, at \$2 million. [An inferior remake, **Mutiny on the Bounty (1962)**, starred Marlon Brando as Fletcher Christian.] Soon after, MGM produced the epic **The Good Earth (1937)**, the last film of legendary producer Irving Thalberg - it was also an adaptation - of the Pearl S. Buck novel about Chinese peasants who faced, among other things, a devastating locust plague.

During the 40s, epics didn't fare very well, due to the scarcity of the war years. One exception was the British Shakespearean film from Laurence Olivier, **Henry V (1944)**, with an American release in 1946. Best Picture and Best Actor-nominated Olivier won a special Academy Award for "his outstanding achievement as actor, producer and director in bringing *Henry V* to the screen."

Cecil B. De Mille's Biblical and Roman Empire Epics of the Sound Era:



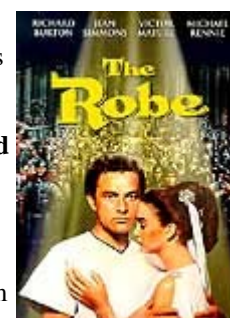
Beginning around the mid-1930s, De Mille's **The Sign of the Cross (1932)** featured Charles Laughton as a depraved Emperor Nero, Christians being consumed by lions in the arena, Roman orgies, and Claudette Colbert as the Emperor's wife in a bathing scene. In the following year, his version of **Cleopatra (1934)** featured Claudette Colbert again as the temptress Queen of Egypt. After a long hiatus, the famous director returned to his Biblical epic format with the first major post-war epic derived from the Book of Judges in the Old Testament - Paramount's extravagant spectacle **Samson and Delilah (1949)**. It starred ravishing Hedy Lamarr as the vixenish, vindictive Philistine woman who seduced long-haired Danite strongman Victor Mature. In the most spectacular scenes, Samson fought with a lion, destroyed an army with the jawbone of an ass, and brought down the Temple of Gaza. [Two others with dual-character titles also appeared during the era: Henry King's **David and Bathsheba (1951)** with a miscast Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, and King Vidor's expensive **Solomon and Sheba (1959)** with Yul Brynner (replacing the deceased Tyrone Power who passed away during filming) and Gina Lollobrigida.]

Showman De Mille reshot his own silent era 1923 film in the mid-1950s in the wide-screen Technicolor format on a grander scale. His 70th (and final film), **The Ten Commandments (1956)** starred actor Charlton Heston as the Hebrew leader Moses, performing special effects plagues before Yul Brynner as the Pharaoh Rameses, and parting the Red Sea for the Israelites. The film's sole Oscar win was for its special effects. [In the same year, producer Michael Todd's epic travelogue presentation of Jules Verne's 1872 novel **Around the World in 80 Days (1956)** won Best Picture.]

Other 50s and 60s Grand-Scale Biblical and 'Sword and Sandal' Epics:

In the 50s, the sound era brought more Biblical, historical, or Grecian/Roman times epics, alongside the development of colorful wide-screen CinemaScope to lure viewers away from their home televisions with free programming. Mervyn LeRoy's and MGM's full-scale, big-budget **Quo Vadis? (1951)** with Robert Taylor and Deborah Kerr, told the tale of Emperor Nero's (Peter Ustinov) times and Christian persecution, and included great spectacle, costumes, romance, and action. Using sets left-over from *Quo Vadis?* (1951), MGM followed with Joseph L. Mankiewicz's hit **Julius Caesar (1953)**, a star-studded, faithful Shakespearean adaptation with James Mason, John Gielgud, Louis Calhern (as Julius Caesar) and Marlon Brando (as Marc Antony). In the same year, Columbia produced the opulent, non-widescreen historical/religious epic **Salome (1953)** with Rita Hayworth as the title character Princess and Charles Laughton as King Herod.

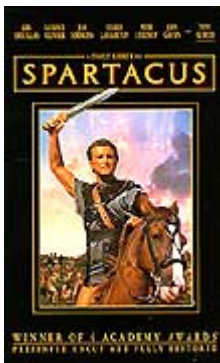
Director Henry Koster's and 20th Century Fox's **The Robe (1953)** was the *first* widescreen CinemaScope feature film. The landmark film starred Richard Burton as young Roman tribune Marcellus Gallio whose life was affected by Jesus' robe, Victor Mature as his converted slave Demetrius, and Jean Simmons as Diana. Its success spurred the development of a sequel of sorts, Delmer Daves' **Demetrius and the Gladiators (1954)**, again with Victor Mature and also Susan Hayward. Mature, one of the mainstays of the ancient epic, also starred in Fox's intelligent film about 14th century BC Egypt in the same year - **The Egyptian (1954)**, with supporting roles from Gene Tierney, Jean Simmons, and Peter Ustinov. It also included a score from Alfred Newman and Bernard Herrmann. Douglas Sirk's *first* Cinemascope film



was the uncharacteristic 'sword and sandal' historical costume adventure **The Sign of the Cross** (1954). It starred Jeff Chandler as a Roman centurion battling the forces of long-haired Attila the Hun (Jack Palance!) with a Fu Manchu mustache.

By the mid-50s and for the decade afterwards, many of these kinds of epics were typecasting various players, such as Victor Mature, Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, Richard Burton, Jean Simmons, Peter Ustinov, and Stephen Boyd. Richard Burton starred as the title character in writer-director-producer Robert Rossen's Cinemascope epic **Alexander the Great** (1956). [Other epic films about Alexander the Great, directed by Oliver Stone and Baz Luhrmann, are to be released in 2004 and 2005 respectively.]

William Wyler's and MGM's beautifully framed, eleven Oscar-winning blockbuster film ★ **Ben-Hur** (1959), derived from Major General Lew Wallace's *A Tale of the Christ*, was a remake of the earlier classic silent film of the same title with Ramon Novarro and Francis X. Bushman. This newer version, a \$15 million three and a half-hour remake, starred Charlton Heston as the title character, and Stephen Boyd as his childhood friend/Roman enemy Messala, and included the same exciting slave galley battle scene and memorable chariot race.



The 1960s opened with Stanley Kubrick's intelligent gladiator-revolt epic **Spartacus** (1960) - it was based on Howard Fast's novel (with a script by Fast and Dalton Trumbo, both blacklisted during the McCarthy 'witch hunts') about an aborted Roman slave uprising in 73 B.C. Its original director Anthony Mann was fired two weeks into production - the opening shots of the film remain from his work. *Spartacus* was the *first* film to list a black-listed writer's name on the screen.

Epic star Charlton Heston portrayed legendary 11th-century medieval Spanish hero/warrior Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar (El Cid) who united the Moors and Christians under one King, with Sophia Loren in Anthony Mann's spectacular and handsome-looking **El Cid** (1961), an adaptation from French playwright Pierre Corneille's work. Nicholas Ray reprised the intelligently-told **King of Kings** (1961), another tale of the life of Christ starring Jeffrey Hunter and narrated by Orson Welles. Dino De Laurentis produced **Barabbas** (1962) which starred Anthony Quinn as the murderous thief who was haunted for life after being freed by Pilate and exchanged for Jesus. Another Biblical epic, director Robert Aldrich's Italian-made **Sodom and Gomorrah** (1962) depicted the destruction of the two sinful cities with expensive production values.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz directed the all-star costly, opulent, four-hour version of 20th Century Fox's flop **Cleopatra** (1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor as the provocatively-costumed Egyptian Queen, Richard Burton (in his best epic appearance) as Marc Antony, and Rex Harrison as Julius Caesar. Taking five years to prepare and 10 months to shoot on a budget that grew to \$44 million, the film nearly bankrupted Fox Studios. Taylor became the *first* star to be paid \$1 million for this role.



Anthony Mann's big-budget historical epic **The Fall of the Roman Empire** (1964) with Stephen Boyd chronicled events in ancient Rome. And George Stevens' **The Greatest Story Ever Told** (1965) featured many Hollywood and international stars in unexpected roles - including Charlton Heston as John the Baptist and Max Von Sydow as Jesus. Director John Huston's epic three-hour **The Bible** (1966) was a misnomer when all the other directors in producer Dino De Laurentiis' extensive project bowed out. [A subtitle was added to the film's title, making it **The Bible: In the Beginning**, referring to the fact that only the first 22 chapters of Genesis were included, with the story of Creation, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark and the flood (with Huston as Noah himself), and the patriarchal story of Abraham and Sarah.]

Biographical (Biopics):

Another subgenre of epics are '*biopics*' or *biographical* works, that dramatize the life of an actual historical figure (usually a 'Great Man', politician or President, entertainer, inventor/scientist, military leader, artist, sports hero or celebrity). Genre hybrids are common in this sub-genre. In many cases, these films put an emphasis on the larger events (wartime, political or social conditions) surrounding the person's entire life as they rise to fame and glory.



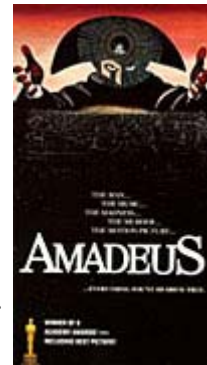
A few examples in early film history include: two award-winning, Warner Bros.

historical/biographical films, both starring Paul Muni - William Dieterle's **The Story of Louis Pasteur (1936)** about the famous French scientist, and the fictionalized Best Picture-winning **The Life of Emile Zola (1937)** about the famous French writer and court defender. Other examples include Norman Taurog's children's dramatic film **Young Tom Edison (1940)** about the famed inventor (Mickey Rooney), the historical drama **Marie Antoinette (1938)**, about the famous Austrian princess who married future King Louis XVI, John Ford's quasi-biography **Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)** with Henry Fonda in the title role, and Raymond Massey in an adaptation of Robert Sherwood's Pulitzer Prize winning play, **Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1940)**. Although the film traces the career of a fictional newspaper tycoon (patterned after William Randolph Hearst), ★ **Citizen Kane (1941)** can be considered a life-story 'biopic.' Henry King's historical/political drama **Wilson (1944)** immortalized the life story of WWI's US President Woodrow Wilson, much like the film biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's life in **Sunrise at Campobello (1960)**.

Artists and literary authors have also inspired biographical film epics, such as two films from Vincente Minnelli. His film **Madame Bovary (1949)** starred James Mason as Gustave Flaubert on whose classic novel the film was based, and another film, **Lust for Life (1956)** featured Kirk Douglas as tormented Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh. Also, Billy Wilder's **The Spirit of St. Louis (1957)** dramatized the historical figure of 27 year old Charles Lindbergh (James Stewart), the "Lone Eagle." (Also see the [dramas](#) genre for [sports biopics](#)).

More recent examples of biographical epics include the following films:

- George C. Scott's unforgettable portrayal of the cantankerous WWII general in the highly-regarded **Patton (1970)**
- Sir Richard Attenborough's \$22 million production of **Gandhi (1982)** featured Oscar-winning Ben Kingsley as the saintly 20th century Indian Mahatma - pacifist and spiritual leader
- the multiple award-winning film adaptation of the musical Broadway hit **Amadeus (1984)**, from director Milos Forman, viewed the antics of young musical prodigy Mozart (Tom Hulce) [In its year of winning the Oscar competition, it was running against two other big pictures: David Lean's **A Passage to India (1984)** and **The Killing Fields (1984)**]
- Bernardo Bertolucci's honored epic of the Chinese Ching Dynasty and the life of Pu Yi, China's last emperor in the Best Picture-winning **The Last Emperor (1987)**
- Oliver Stone's **Nixon (1995)** with Anthony Hopkins as the scandalous 37th President of the US and Joan Allen as his supportive, long-suffering wife Pat
- writer/director Spike Lee's epic film **Malcolm X (1992)** told the life story of the slain civil rights leader with a great performance from Denzel Washington
- Attenborough's reverential **Chaplin (1992)** chronicled the life story of silent comedian and filmmaker Charlie Chaplin (Robert Downey, Jr.)
- Tim Burton's **Ed Wood (1995)** was about the maverick, low-budget, Hollywood director (Johnny Depp) of cult films
- Alan Parker's musical biography **Evita (1996)** showcased Madonna playing the role of beloved Argentinian Eva Peron



Epics of Royalty Figures:

One of the most common themes or topics of epics are royalty, kings, or leading personalities or figures from the times. (See [adventure films](#) for epics related to the King Arthur tale.) Royals have been the subject of epics such as the following:

- French director Abel Gance's phenomenal four hour long **Napoleon (1927)** about the legendary military hero
- Oscar-winning actor Charles Laughton as the infamous king in Alexander Korda's **The Private Life of Henry VIII (1933)** with doomed wife Jane Seymour (Elsa Lanchester) and Anne Boleyn (Merle Oberon)
- two versions of the life of 18th century Russia's Catherine the Great in the same year: Josef von Sternberg's mostly fictional account **The Scarlet Empress (1934)** - with Marlene Dietrich, and Paul Czinner's **Catherine the Great (1934)** with Elisabeth Bergner

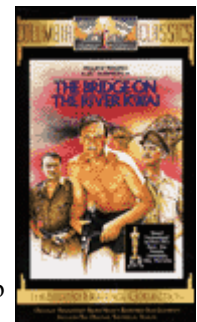


- Rouben Mamoulian's [Queen Christina \(1933\)](#) with Greta Garbo in the lead role as the 17th century Swedish queen
- Michael Curtiz' **The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex (1939)** with Bette Davis as the Queen and Errol Flynn as Robert Devereaux, the Earl of Essex
- Laurence Olivier's **Henry V (1944)**, a Shakespearean adaptation about the King of England who battled the French over Normandy; also director/star Kenneth Branagh's version in the late 80s, **Henry V (1989)**
- Sergei Eisenstein's **Ivan the Terrible (1944)** about the heroic 16th century Russian Czar Ivan IV
- MGM's Techni-colored adventure swashbuckler epic **Ivanhoe (1952)** with Robert Taylor in the title role
- Anatole Litvak's **Anastasia (1956)** about the early 20th century story of Princess Anastasia (Ingrid Bergman), the daughter of the late Czar Nicholas - this film also marked actress Bergman's return to Hollywood after a period of exile with a Best Actress Oscar
- Peter Glenville's costly UK historical costume drama **Becket (1964)** with Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole in the lead roles as Thomas Becket (the Archbishop of Canterbury) and King Henry II
- Best Picture-winning director Fred Zinnemann's **A Man for All Seasons (1966)** about the gripping conflict between idealistic Catholic Sir Thomas More (Paul Scofield) and King Henry VIII (Robert Shaw) over the king's decision to break from the Roman Catholic Church to form his own Church of England (Anglican/Episcopalian), so he could divorce his first wife and marry Anne Boleyn, since his first wife failed to produce a male heir to the throne
- Anthony Harvey's UK film **The Lion in Winter (1968)**, a superb character study of Britain's 12th century King Henry II (Peter O'Toole) and his estranged-exiled wife and Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (Katharine Hepburn in an Oscar-winning role)
- Charles Jarrott's UK film **Anne of the Thousand Days (1969)**, an adaptation of Maxwell Anderson's 1948 stage play, in which Richard Burton as England's King Henry VIII casts off Catharine of Aragon to marry Anne Boleyn (Genevieve Bujold) against the church's wishes, but then executes his love under the pressures of court politics when she proves to be barren and cannot produce a male heir
- Franklin Schaffner's beautiful-to-behold **Nicholas and Alexandra (1971)** chronicles the last 14 years of the rule of the last of the Russian Romanovs - Russian Czar Nicholas II (Michael Jayston) and his wife Czarina Alexandra (Janet Suzman) - up to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and their execution a year later [Norman Jewison's epic musical of the same year, **Fiddler on the Roof (1971)**, was also set at the turn-of-the-20th century, pre-revolutionary Russia, in the Ukranian ghetto village of Anatevka]
- Indian director Shekhar Kapur's **Elizabeth (1998)** with break-out star Cate Blanchett as the pale-faced 16th century Virgin Queen

The Great Epic Director - David Lean:

British director David Lean has produced some of the best historical epics of all-time - films that focused on a major romance, character, or swashbuckling adventure in the foreground, with the historical events serving as a colorful backdrop. His films had a major effect upon the British film industry for years to come. Lean's epic masterpieces included:

- the anti-war epic drama of the struggle of wills between British POW Col. Nicholson (Alec Guinness) and Japanese Colonel Saito in ★ [The Bridge on the River Kwai \(1957\)](#) during the construction of a rail bridge to link Bangkok and Rangoon
- Best Picture-winning ★ [Lawrence of Arabia \(1962\)](#) with Peter O'Toole as the legendary Arab and desert-loving British officer T. E. Lawrence during World War I
- an adaptation of Russian writer Boris Pasternak's novel, **Doctor Zhivago (1965)**, about a war-time romance during the snow-swept Russian Revolution
- and finally Lean's swan song, the brilliant **Passage to India (1984)**, based on E. M. Forster's 1924 novel of the romantic adventures of a young Englishwoman in the East



The Merchant-Ivory Period Films:

The exquisite, beautifully-composed, best-known *period films* of the triumvirate (producer Ismail Merchant, director/screenwriter James Ivory, and novelist Praver Jhabvala) have often used historical settings as backdrops for their well-crafted dramas, often taken from the writings of E.M Forster with recreations of Edwardian England with superior production values. Some of their greatest films include:

- **The Europeans (1970)**, a literary adaptation of Henry James' work

- **Heat and Dust (1982)**, an adaptation from Jhabvala's 1975 Booker Prize-winning novel
- **The Bostonians (1984)**, another Henry James' adaptation, with an Oscar-nominated performance from Vanessa Redgrave
- **A Room with a View (1984)**, a romantic comedy adaptation from E.M. Forster's novel that was nominated for eight Academy Awards (and won for Best Adapted Screenplay)
- **Maurice (1987)**, the team's second E.M. Forster adaptation
- **Mr. and Mrs. Bridge (1990)**
- the Best Director-nominated **Howard's End (1992)**, the third Forster adaptation with another Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar, with award-winning Emma Thompson, Anthony Hopkins, and Vanessa Redgrave
- the critically-acclaimed **The Remains of the Day (1993)**, adapted from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, with Anthony Hopkins as an emotionally-crippled butler
- **Jefferson in Paris (1995)**, about the public and private life of the US President (Nick Nolte)
- **Surviving Picasso (1996)**, another semi-biographical epic of the famous painter



Other Great Epics:



The greatest Civil War film and the most definitive of all epics was also a Southern costume drama - David O. Selznick's sweeping production of ★ **Gone With The Wind (1939)**. In his later years, cinematic pioneer King Vidor directed the lusty Western epic **Duel in the Sun (1946)** with Lionel Barrymore as the sprawling land baron. The all-star, panoramic *Cinerama* film, **How the West Was Won (1962)**, was another example of a western epic. Costner's Best Picture-winning revisionist epic western **Dances with Wolves (1990)** was the *first* Western to win the top honor since **Cimarron (1930)**.

Other notable war-time epics have been produced, including the re-creation of D-Day in Darryl F. Zanuck's **The Longest Day (1962)**, the WWII hero adventure **PT 109 (1963)** about John F. Kennedy's (Cliff Robertson) courageous rescue of fellow Marines, the big-screen epic biography **Patton (1970)**, Joseph Sargent's **MacArthur (1977)** about the rebellious, showy WWII general portrayed by Gregory Peck, and the recent recreation of the Nazi Holocaust in Best Director and Best Picture-winning Steven Spielberg's ★ **Schindler's List (1993)**. Also Mel Gibson's Best Director and Best Picture-winning **Braveheart (1995)** brought the 13th century story of medieval Scottish patriot William Wallace's rebellion against the British to the big screen. Spielberg's epic war film, **Saving Private Ryan (1998)** opened with a bloody account of the Normandy D-Day landing.

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The Best Picture winner of the mid-1980s, Sydney Pollack's **Out of Africa (1985)**, was about author Isak Dinesen (Meryl Streep) and her love affair with handsome aviator Denys Finch-Hatton (Robert Redford). And into the 1990s, there were these two Best Picture epic victors:

- Anthony Minghella's adventure/war epic **The English Patient (1996)** about Count Laszlo Almasy (Ralph Fiennes) - a burned WWII pilot and his tragic love affair with a married Englishwoman (Kristin Scott Thomas)
- James Cameron's \$285 million big-budget romantic/historical epic **Titanic (1997)**, a blockbuster recreation of the fateful first/last voyage of the *R.M.S. Titanic* in 1912 told alongside an ill-advised romance between a steerage passenger (Leonard DiCaprio) and a society debutante (Kate Winslet) - its 11 Oscars tied the all-time record with ★ **Ben-Hur (1959)**



Historical Epic Dramas from Literary Works:



Literary adaptations of novels and plays have provided the plots and storylines of hundreds of historical dramas. There have been numerous screen versions of Russian writer Leo Tolstoy's work, **Anna Karenina**. The first was the classic 1935 film starring Greta Garbo and Fredric March, and then it was filmed in 1948 with Vivien Leigh in the title role. Similarly, Tolstoy's epic melodramatic novel **War and Peace (1956)** (with a final running time of 208 minutes), with impressive battle scenes (especially the Battle of Borodino) and panoramas, was brought to the screen by director King Vidor in the mid-50s. It starred Audrey Hepburn as Natasha, Herbert Lom as Napoleon, Oscar Homolka as General Kutzov, and Henry Fonda as Pierre. A Soviet version of **War and Peace (1963-1968)** by director Sergei Bondarchuk was more faithful to the book at 373 minutes in length, and took five years to complete.

Some other prominent examples include Louisa May Alcott's **Little Women (1933, 1994)**, Charles Dickens' **David Copperfield (1935)**, Anthony Hope's **Prisoner of Zenda (1937)**, Emily Bronte's ★ **Wuthering Heights (1939)**, Jane Austen's **Pride and Prejudice (1940)**, Daphne Du Maurier's **Rebecca (1940)**, Charlotte Bronte's **Jane Eyre (1944)**, Charles Dickens' **Great Expectations (1946)**, director King Vidor's film adaptation of the Ayn Rand novel **The Fountainhead (1949)**, Thomas Hardy's **Tess (1979)**, Charles Dickens' **Little Dorrit (1987)**, Edith Wharton's novel for Martin Scorsese's **The Age of Innocence (1993)** about 19th century New York society, and Henry James' early 20th century novel for Ian Softley's UK film **The Wings of the Dove (1994)** with Helena Bonham Carter.

Major Epics in the New Decade:

New Zealander Peter Jackson's trilogy of author J.R.R. Tolkien's best-selling fantasy, **The Lord of the Rings (2001-2003)** was told on a mammoth, epic scale. Ridley Scott's R-rated Best Picture winner **Gladiator (2000)** (with state-of-the-art CGI visual effects) grossed \$458 million worldwide, won five Oscars, and inspired a wave of other 'sword and sandal' epics in the next few years. In 2003, Peter Weir's **Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World (2003)** was a swashbuckling epic tale about a chase between a French vessel and a British frigate (commanded by Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe)) during the Napoleonic Wars. A muscle-bound Brad Pitt starred as Greek hero/warrior Achilles in Wolfgang Petersen's **Troy (2004)**, based on Homer's 2,800 year-old epic poem *The Iliad* about the 10 year war between Troy (headed by King Priam (Peter O'Toole)) and Greece, and a blonde Colin Farrell starred in Oliver Stone's much-criticized box-office disaster **Alexander (2004)**. Ridley Scott's extravagant, beautifully filmed and fictionalized **Kingdom of Heaven (2005)** told about the 12th century Crusades, and Warners'/director Zack Snyder's bloody, CG-enhanced **300 (2007)** was based on Frank Miller's vividly graphic novel that retold the story about the famous last stand in the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C. (a Spartan army of 300 led by King Leonidas (Gerard Butler) fought against King Xerxes' Persian army of 250,000). [The notorious Alamo-style battle was also the subject of **The 300 Spartans (1962)**.]

Selection of Greatest Epic Films:

Greatest Early Epic Films:

Quo Vadis? (1912, It.)
 Cabiria (1914, It.)
 Judith of Bethulia (1914)
 ★ [The Birth of a Nation \(1915\)](#)
 ★ [Intolerance \(1916\)](#)
 Orphans of the Storm (1921)
 The Covered Wagon (1923)
 The Ten Commandments (1923) (remade 1956)
 The Thief of Bagdad (1924)
 The Battleship Potemkin (1925, USSR)
 Ben-Hur (1926) (remade 1959)
 King of Kings (1927) (remade 1961)
 Napoleon (Fr.) (1927)
 The Sign of the Cross (1932)
 Cavalcade (1933)
[Cleopatra \(1934\)](#)
 Anna Karenina (1935)
 The Crusades (1935)
 The Last Days of Pompeii (1935)
[Mutiny on the Bounty \(1935\)](#)
 San Francisco (1936)
 ★ [The Adventures of Robin Hood \(1938\)](#)
 Alexander Nevsky (1938, USSR)
 In Old Chicago (1938)
 Drums Along the Mohawk (1939)
 ★ [Gone With The Wind \(1939\)](#)
 Northwest Passage (1940)
 Ivan the Terrible, Part I and II (1944, 1946, USSR)
 Wilson (1944)
 ★ [The Best Years of Our Lives \(1946\)](#)
[Duel in the Sun \(1946\)](#)
 Anna Karenina (1947)
 The Fountainhead (1949)

Madame Bovary (1949)
 Samson and Delilah (1949)
 Quo Vadis? (1951)
 The Greatest Show on Earth (1952)
 The Robe (1953)
 Seven Samurai (1954, Jp.)
 Sign of the Pagan (1954)
 Giant (1956)
 Lust for Life (1956)
[The Ten Commandments \(1956\)](#)
 War and Peace (1956)
 ★ [The Bridge on the River Kwai \(1957\)](#)
 ★ [Ben-Hur \(1959\)](#)

Greatest Recent Epic Films:

Exodus (1960)
 Spartacus (1960)
 El Cid (1961)
 King of Kings (1961)
 How the West was Won (1961)
 Barabbas (1962)
 ★ [Lawrence of Arabia \(1962\)](#)
 The Longest Day (1962)
 Cleopatra (1963)
 The Great Escape (1963)
 55 Days at Peking (1963)
 Sodom and Gomorrah (1963)
 The Fall of the Roman Empire (1964)
 Doctor Zhivago (1965)
 The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965)
 The Bible: In the Beginning... (1966)
 Hawaii (1966)
 A Man For All Seasons (1966, UK)
 The Sand Pebbles (1966)
 ★ [2001: A Space Odyssey \(1968\)](#)
[Patton \(1970\)](#)
 Ryan's Daughter (1970)
 ★ [The Godfather \(1972\)](#)
 The Poseidon Adventure (1972)
 ★ [The Godfather, Part II \(1974\)](#)
 The Towering Inferno (1974)
 Barry Lyndon (1975)
 ★ [Nashville \(1975\)](#)
 The Wind and the Lion (1975)
 1900 (1976)
 ★ [Star Wars Trilogy \(1977\)](#)
 Heaven's Gate (1980)
 Reds (1981)
 Gandhi (1982)
 Dune (1984)
 Passage to India (1984)
 Once Upon a Time in America (1984)
 Out of Africa (1985)
 Ran (1985, Jp.)
 The Mission (1986)
 Empire of the Sun (1987)
 The Last Emperor (1987)
 Dances with Wolves (1990)
 JFK (1991)
 Malcolm X (1992)
 Gettysburg (1993)
 Jurassic Park (1993)
 ★ [Schindler's List \(1993\)](#)
 Apollo 13 (1995)
 Braveheart (1995)

Nixon (1995)
The English Patient (1996)
Kundun (1997)
Titanic (1997)
Gladiator (2000)
The Patriot (2000)
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (2002)
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003)
Alexander (2004)
Troy (2004)
Kingdom of Heaven (2005)
The New World (2005)
300 (2007)