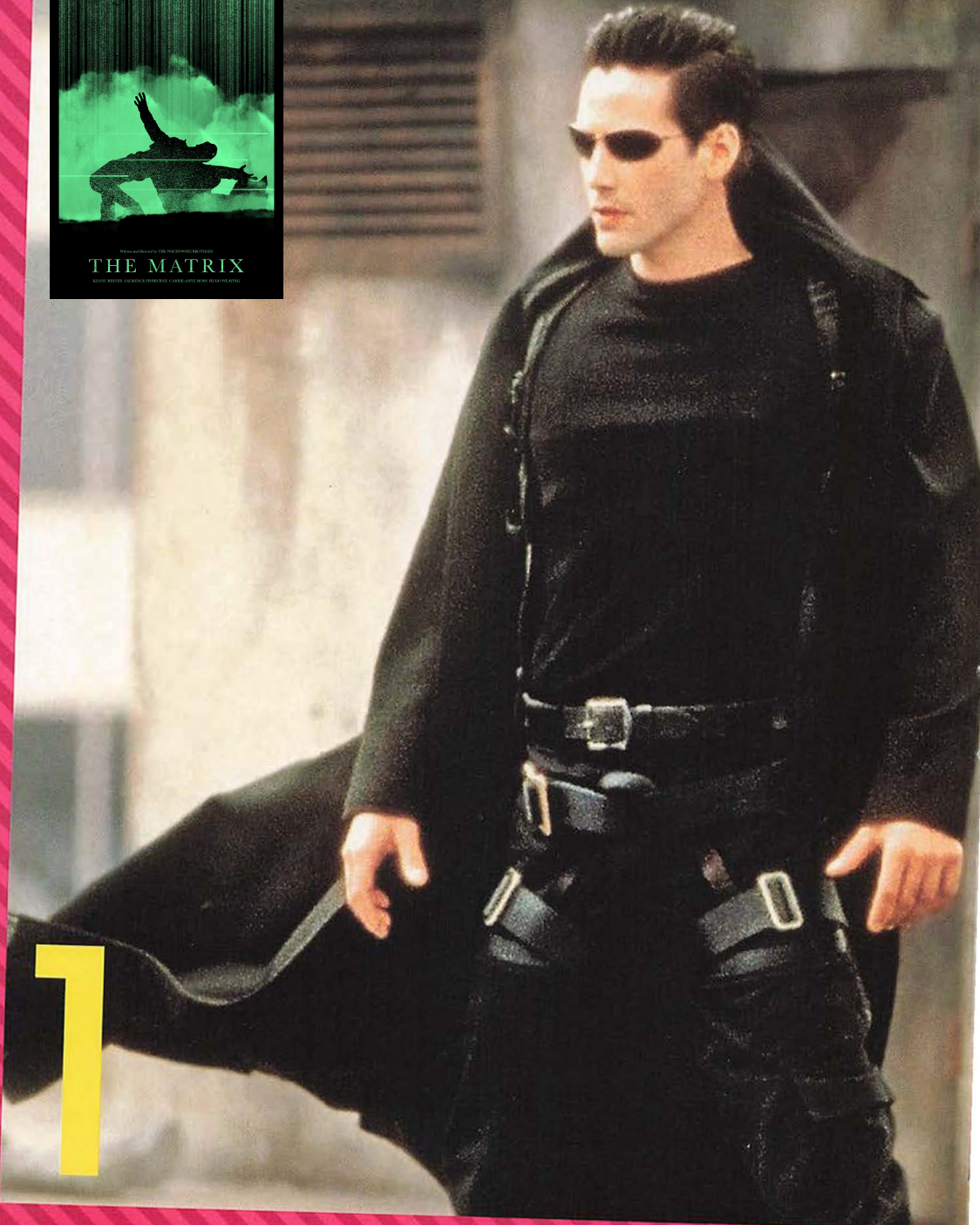




THE MATRIX

WARRIOR BROTHERS AND THE MATRIX BROTHERS
Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Hugo Weaving, Laurence R. Rabbia



1

THE SCI-FI

25

THE BEST MOVIES AND TV
FROM THE PAST 25 YEARS

THE MATRIX 1999

DIRECTED BY The Wachowski brothers

Heading into 1999, there was one movie that was supposed to be the second coming. The culmination of an extended sci-fi moment that had helped hardwire the culture for mythic, stargazing escapism. By all rights, it should be sitting atop this list. But *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* turned out to be a case study in empty pop idolatry. Fortunately, there was a movie released the same year that was able to play that part, a film as unexpected, groundbreaking, and capture-the-imagination entertaining as the first *Star Wars*: *The Matrix*.

Written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski—a pair of hyper-erudite, super-shy comic-book writers-turned-filmmakers who became overnight cult icons for their trouble—*The Matrix* was one geeky gumbo of

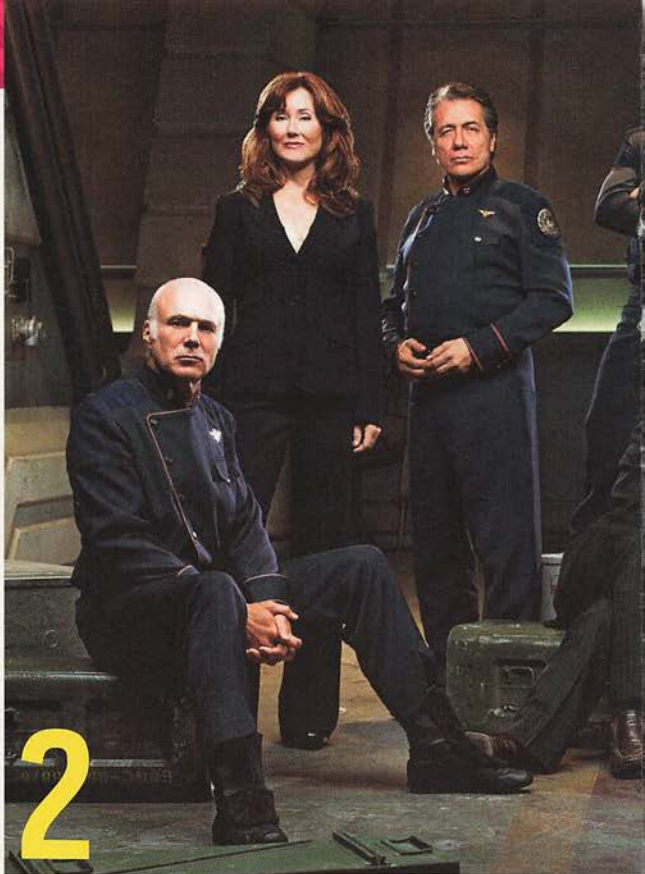
brainy mumbo jumbo; a multimegabyte compression of mythological and theological ideas, Hong Kong action-film aesthetics, and videogame special effects. Somehow, it worked. Brilliantly. Keanu Reeves was Neo, a spiritually numb computer programmer who learns that not only is his life an illusory sham—the world as he knows it is a virtual-reality prison, created by sentient machines who had won an apocalyptic



war against humanity—but that he is destined to become a hero-messiah. *The Matrix* crackled with late-'90s millennial angst and tech-boom delirium—a freaky-fun fable for a ghost-in-the-machine culture. Bottom line: *The Matrix* was just...whoa.

POP CULTURE LEGACY With its cutting-edge effects, balletic fight sequences, and leather-dusters-and-black-shades wardrobe, *The Matrix* redefined the look of Hollywood action. It sparked a moviegoing crush on Asian wire-fu (see: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and set the stage for our current moment of superhero pop and thoughtful science fiction (see: *Battlestar Galactica*, *Lost*). It also spawned two sequels that sucked. Nonetheless, *The Matrix*'s accomplishment remains undiminished.

THE BEST BIT The moment that brought bullet time to the movies: Neo's rooftop gunfight with a nefarious Agent. Slow motion has never been so kinetic. —Jeff Jensen



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA 2003–Present

DEVELOPED BY Ronald D. Moore

You remember the show, right? Lorne Greene in a shiny cape leading a band of well-coiffed thirtysomethings as they flee from extras in shiny suits? Glen A. Larson's original '70s *Battlestar Galactica*: not the worst by-product of the *Star Wars* juggernaut, but close. So one could view the unmitigated brilliance that is Sci Fi Channel's reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* series two ways:

(1) They had no place to go but up or (2) it's amazing they did so much with so little. The core of the *Galactica* plot—the last human survivors of a catastrophic genocide are on the run from their attackers, the Cylons—carried a new resonance in the wake of 9/11. And in keeping with science fiction's grandest tradition, *BSG* tapped into the power of allegory to enrich its outer-space



dogfights and military pomp with the gravity of issues like abortion, terrorism, stem-cell research, racism, even the war in Iraq. The dysfunctionally awesome cast gives it all the ring of authenticity: from Edward James Olmos' crusty warhorse Admiral Adama and Mary McDonnell's tender-as-naails President Roslin to Katee Sackhoff's bedeviled pilot Kara Thrace and Tricia Helfer's glacially threatening Cylon known only as Number Six. But the real MVPs of the ensemble are Michael Hogan, who plays Adama's boozy right-hand man Saul

Tigh, and James Callis, who makes you feel for Gaius Baltar, the best, most conflicted villain on TV. **POP CULTURE LEGACY** The damned thing won a Peabody award for its second season. It's proving what sci-fi fans have known for decades: Science fiction is as legitimate a vehicle for human drama as any other genre. **THE BEST BIT** While any given episode of *Galactica* is better than 90 percent of what's on the air, the thrill of discovery makes the first season (including the miniseries) the way to go. —Marc Bernardin



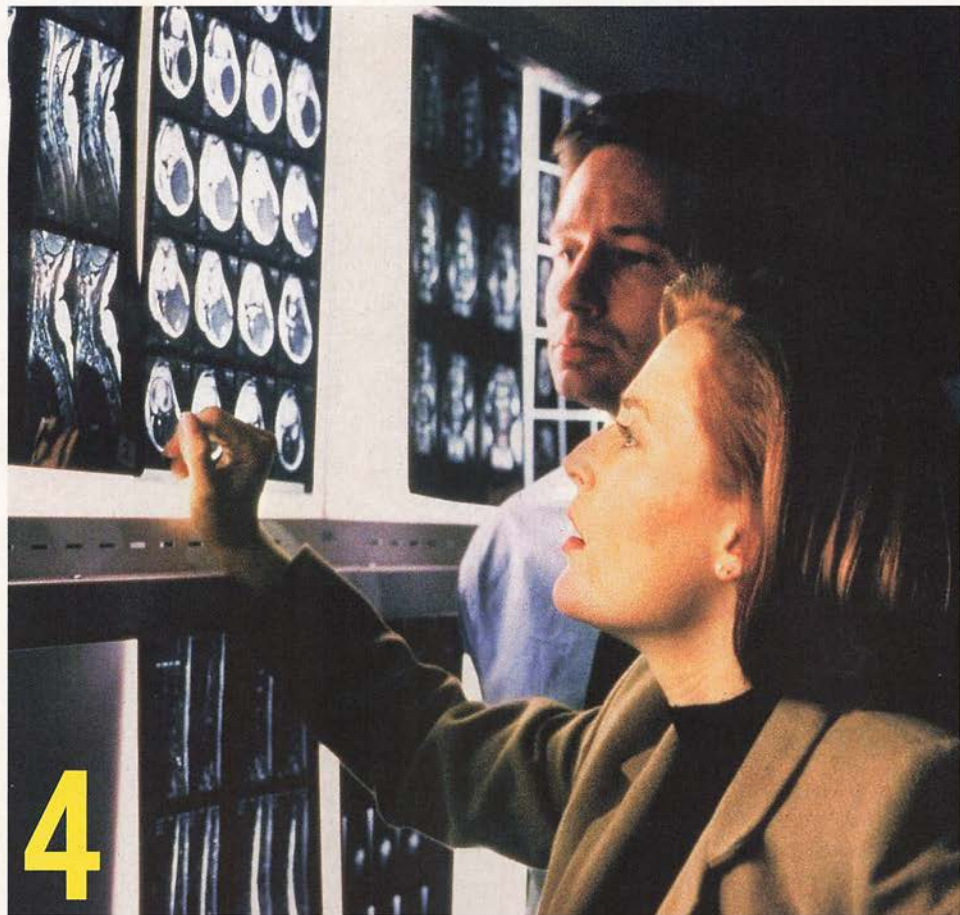
BLADE RUNNER 1982

DIRECTED BY Ridley Scott

Blade Runner follows cop Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford)—who may or may not be human—as he attempts to terminate four bioengineered androids, called replicants, on the streets of 2019 Los Angeles. Adapted from a novel by noted writer and nut-case Philip K. Dick, the film, particularly in its Director's Cut incarnation, asks big questions—namely, “Are you really who you think you are?” And it does so against the backdrop of a stunningly designed near-future worldscape whose many nods to globalization make it seem more prescient with every passing day.

POP CULTURE LEGACY Scott's rain-lashed, dystopic film offered a hugely influential vision of a future. In subsequent films, this, more often than not, is what the future looks like.

THE BEST BIT The genuinely heart-breaking pre-death speech by the replicant played by Rutger Hauer (“I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion...”) is also the most geeked-out, hardcore sci-fi sequence in the pantheon of all-time great movie moments. —Clark Collis



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THE X-FILES 1993–2002

CREATED BY Chris Carter

Once upon a time, the FBI sent no-nonsense special agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) to debunk the crackpot theories of special agent Fox “Spooky” Mulder (David Duchovny). What they got instead was a conspiracy-fighting team so powerful it threatened to bring down the shady men who’d infiltrated the highest levels of government with their dreams of alien/human hybrid technology. What did we get? One hell of a TV show—even if we never quite got the truth. **POP CULTURE LEGACY** For the first time since *The Twilight Zone*, viewers could ponder the mysteries

of the universe *and* get scared silly. From inbred mutants to satanic cults, Mulder and Scully’s darting flashlights lit up some seriously freaky darkness. And like *Twin Peaks* before it, *Files* made conspiracy-theorizing an addictive couch-potato pastime.

THE BEST BIT For the perfect balance of mythology and monster-of-the-week, pick up season 3. You’ll get plenty of geeky goodness—the black oil, the Cigarette Smoking Man, the chip in Scully’s neck—but you’ll also get brilliant stand-alone episodes like “Clyde Bruckman’s Final Repose.” When guest star Peter Boyle, playing a winsome psychic, tells Scully she’ll never die, it’s hard not to wish the same could have been said for this show’s heyday. —Whitney Pastorek



STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN 1982

DIRECTED BY Nicholas Meyer

Klingons. Romulans. The Borg. Over the better part of four decades, the crew of the Starship *Enterprise* has tangled with many a pesky intergalactic foe. But none had as much genetically bred wit, wiliness, and... well, wrath as Ricardo Montalban's Khan. Abandoned years earlier by Captain Kirk (William Shatner) on a barren planet (for trying to shipjack the *Enterprise*), Khan survived, sustained by his hunger for vengeance. The parallels between Montalban's leathery-pec'd Khan (Corinthian leather, of course) and *Moby Dick's* maniacal Ahab elevate what could've been just a bloated *Trek* episode. If revenge is a dish best served cold, then this movie is one chilling feast.

POP CULTURE LEGACY The genesis of the "even-number theory" (e.g., the only good *Trek* flicks are the even-numbered sequels), *Khan* is the benchmark against which all *Trek* films are measured.

THE BEST BIT The prize goes to an outwitted Shatner, frothing at the mouth and bursting with rage, bellowing "Khaaaannnnn!" at the top of his lungs. —Chris Nashawaty



BRAZIL 1985

DIRECTED BY Terry Gilliam

A slapstick version of 1984 sounds like a bizarre hybrid, but the frantic tale of ambition-free drone Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce), who takes on the totalitarian government for the sake of his fantasy woman (Kim Greist), is a perversely devastating mix of hilarity and shock. Gilliam creates a depressing, shoddy futurescape of tubes and wires, where the creativity that was supposed to give us robots and jet packs has been channeled into expanding an oppressive bureaucracy that charges suspected dissidents for their own torture.

POP CULTURE LEGACY Echoing the film's David-and-Goliath plot, Gilliam won the fight to release his original version of the movie only after an epic struggle with Universal, the unhappy studio that had repossessed *Brazil*, cut over 40 minutes from it, and added a happy ending. (Both versions are now available on Criterion's superb three-DVD set.) Like Lowry, who dreams of being a brave knight battling evil, the iconoclastic director would repeat this underdog clash against his backers on many of his later pictures, although never to such thrilling results.

THE BEST BIT In a quintessentially dark comic moment, Lowry visits the office of his genial chum Jack (Michael Palin), who, in a blood-smeared smock, babysits his cherubic daughter while putting the screws to some rebels. —Josh Wolk



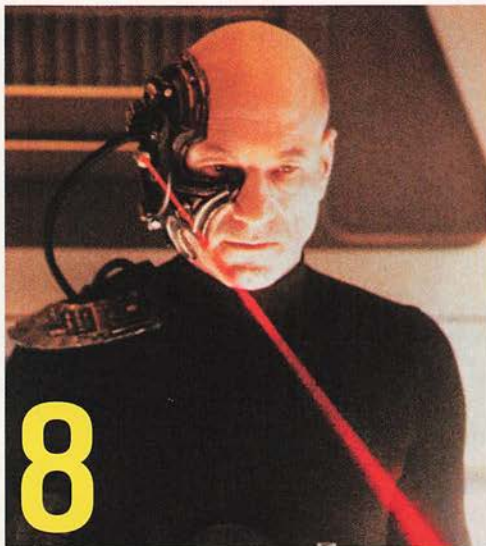
E.T. 1982

DIRECTED BY Steven Spielberg

Twenty-five years ago, *E.T.* invented the sci-fi weepie. And consider this: Have we seen another one since? Until *Star Wars* was rereleased in 1997, *E.T.* was the highest-grossing film of all time, and it's easy to see why. The movie is basically *A New Hope* crossed with *Casablanca*, a mixture as perfect as the chocolate and peanut butter in Reese's Pieces. The bond between Elliott and E.T., one of the most touching film friendships ever, showed that sci-fi was capable of real, glowing heart underneath its fantastical, otherworldly trappings.

POP CULTURE LEGACY The movie's other major accomplishment? Revealing Steven Spielberg as an auteur who was capable of much more than whiz-bang thrills. If not for *E.T.*, there would likely be no *Saving Private Ryan* or *Schindler's List*.

THE BEST BIT A boy, a bicycle, an alien, a full moon, and John Williams' swelling score: Elliott's bike ride through the night sky, with E.T. stuffed in the front basket, will keep giving audiences goose bumps until much nastier extraterrestrials come along and destroy the earth. —Gregory Kirschling



STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION 1987–1994

CREATED BY Gene Roddenberry and Rick Berman

It probably shouldn't have worked, resurrecting *Star Trek* as a TV series. Lightning is hard enough to bottle once, but twice? Just the same, *Trek* godfather Gene Roddenberry gave it a go, and in doing so allowed us to take TV sci-fi seriously again. And the masterstroke was casting Patrick Stewart. By signing on as Capt. Jean-Luc Picard, the Royal Shakespeare Company veteran gave *The Next Generation* a gravitas-laden foundation to build on. (Having Brent Spiner as Data and Jonathan Frakes as Commander Riker definitely helped.) As time went on, the writers and producers erected a sci-fi gold standard, tackling subjects as varied as homosexuality, euthanasia, and slavery—all while flitting around the cosmos doing battle with Romulans, Klingons, and the Borg.

POP CULTURE LEGACY *The Next Generation* resuscitated the dormant *Star Trek* television franchise, spawning *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, and *Enterprise*.

THE BEST BIT Season 3 brought landmark episodes like the time-travel gem "Yesterday's Enterprise," the classic *Trek* touchstone "Sarek," and one of the best season-ending cliff-hangers in TV history: the Borg-centric "The Best of Both Worlds, Part I." —MB



ALIENS 1986

DIRECTED BY James Cameron

Seven years after Ridley Scott's creepy, chest-thumping space thriller *Alien*, James Cameron instilled war-movie testosterone in the sequel, as Sigourney Weaver's Ripley leads a pack of gung-ho Marines to an inhospitable planet now swarming with vicious, acid-bleeding critters. Ripley was the first of a new breed of female action hero, one who can lead a team of frightened men and get the job done on her own terms. And for her efforts, Weaver not only became the first action heroine to strike box office gold, she landed a Best Actress Oscar nomination as well.

POP CULTURE LEGACY In the wake of *Star Wars*, outer-space folk were routinely depicted as quirky, fuzzy creatures. Look no further than Tatooine's infamous cantina. But Cameron—building on Scott's lead—set the cinematic standard for grotesque intergalactic creatures that could (and would) tear your lungs out.

THE BEST BIT While the first film took a less-is-more approach to revealing the gnarly beast, the sequel's queen alien gets her close-up, most memorably in the mano a mano climax. When the queen corners a young orphan, Ripley announces her arrival with Schwarzeneggerian brio: "Get away from her, you bitch!" —Jeff Labrecque



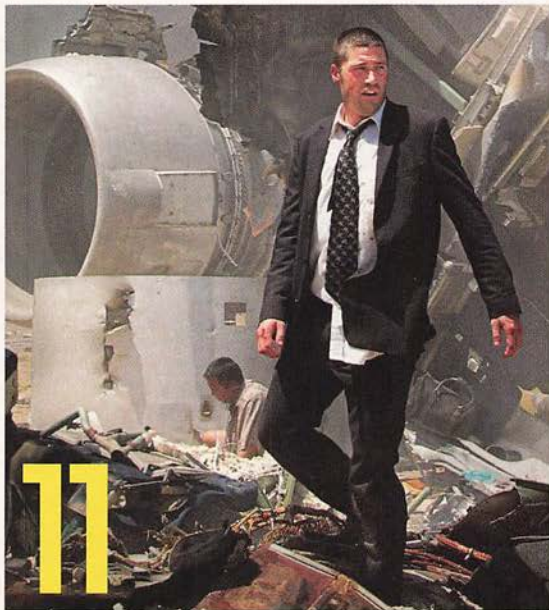
THE THING 1982

DIRECTED BY John Carpenter

Recently, there's been talk in Hollywood of remaking *The Thing*. Please don't. For the love of God, we're begging you. After all, this streamlined exercise in subzero paranoia cannot be improved upon. A badass and bearded Kurt Russell stars as R.J. MacReady, the unofficial leader of a team of scientists in the Antarctic whose camp is infiltrated by an alien who kills, then inhabits the bodies of its victims. As the crew is offed one by one, Carpenter's movie becomes a war of attrition—and a gory war at that. When one of the eggheads (Charles Hallahan) is body-snatched, his severed head sprouts spider legs and scurries across the room, while one of the scientists looks on in disbelief: "You gotta be f---in' kidding!" A flop when it was released, *The Thing* has, with time, been reappraised as a masterpiece.

A masterpiece that Tinseltown shouldn't even think of messing with. **POP CULTURE LEGACY** Rob Bottin's trailblazing gross-out effects work is still the holy grail for monster-makeup geeks everywhere.

THE BEST BIT Wilford Brimley's crotchety Blair going loco when he's quarantined. You'll never look at a bowl of Quaker Oats the same way again. —CN



LOST 2004–Present

CREATED BY J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof

A mysterious island that's home to a shape-shifting smoke monster, a weird science project tasked with saving the world, and a secret society of sinister "Others" who can't make babies—yes, *Lost* certainly has its fair share of sci-fi stuff. And yet, like the best examples of the genre, this unfolding saga about plane-crash survivors trapped in a tropical twilight zone doesn't wallow in its genre elements, but uses them to embellish an exploration of identity, community, and reality itself. Coyly sublimating everything from Jules Verne and H.G. Wells to *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, *Lost* aspires to be an

important entertainment for a pop-soaked, soul-searching age. Now, at the risk of missing the point, how about some damn answers?!

POP CULTURE LEGACY

Building on pioneers *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost* helped to usher in a new era of serialized storytelling and showed Hollywood how cult-pop TV can be leveraged into cash-cow franchises. *Heroes*, say hello to Daddy.

THE BEST BIT The Emmy-winning first season, with its perfect pilot and getting-to-know-you character flashbacks, is an object lesson in capturing the imagination. —JJ



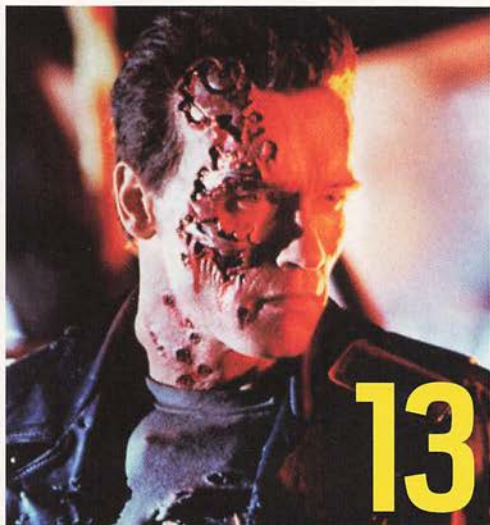
BACK TO THE FUTURE 1985

DIRECTED BY Robert Zemeckis

The space-time continuum is a delicate concept, especially when Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) travels back to 1955 and saves his Peeping Tom father (Crispin Glover) from getting hit by a car. As a result, Marty's randy mother-to-be (Lea Thompson) develops the hots for him, threatening his entire future existence. Twenty-two years later, this timeless sci-fi comedy offers twice the nostalgia: 1985 is nearly as foreign as 1955. (DeLoreans? Jokes about Tab?) Sci-fi has never been as user-friendly as it is here, but not once does the clever script betray the rigid cause/effect tenets of time-travel fiction. (Yes, by "inventing" rock & roll, Marty ensures that his parents fall in love.)

POP CULTURE LEGACY With *Future*, Fox became more than just *Family Ties*' cute Republican—he was a legitimate movie star. Plus, the movie enshrined the phrases "flux capacitor" and "1.21 jigawatts" in the zeitgeist.

THE BEST BIT Glover steals every scene as the bullied dweeb, and sci-fi fans everywhere can relate to his sincere horror at the prospect of having "Darth Vader" (of the planet Vulcan) melt his brain. —JL



THE TERMINATOR/ TERMINATOR 2 1984/1991

DIRECTED BY James Cameron

Oh, if only all sci-fi action movies could be as kick-ass as the first two *Terminators*. There's something so hardcore about the original, the merciless chase picture that expertly cast Arnold Schwarzenegger as the scariest killing machine ever seen. *Terminator 2*, meanwhile, is warmer and more accessible—if just as bloody. At first it seemed wrong that Arnold was now playing the hero, until you settled in and realized that this time Cameron was out to deliver a richer and more layered experience, while still blowing you to the back of the theater with awesome action set pieces.

POP CULTURE LEGACY By spending a then-record \$90 million-plus to make *T2*, Cameron and his liquid-metal T-1000 revolutionized the use of CG technology.

THE BEST BIT So many killer sequences to choose from! For the way it presages the coming effects revolution, we're tempted to highlight the scene in the original when the Terminator tends to his wounds in front of the bathroom mirror. The true winner, though, is the first big chase in *T2*, featuring a semi tractor-trailer careening off an overpass into a river basin below. You can't beat that. —GK



CHILDREN OF MEN 2006

DIRECTED BY Alfonso Cuarón

It probably wasn't Universal's best decision, releasing *Children of Men* on Christmas Day 2006. How many people want to spend their holiday watching a dystopian nightmare, even if it is a work of art? That's sort of like showing *A Clockwork Orange* to your grandma on her birthday. Set in 2027, *Men* is a dark, ripping road movie that follows Clive Owen as he tries to lead the world's first pregnant woman in 18 years to safety. Some naysayers called it too bleak, but—more than any movie in recent memory—we believe this sci-fi thriller will be rediscovered as a true classic down the line.

POP CULTURE LEGACY What stands out is the way *Y Tu Mamá También* director Cuarón uses his futuristic setting to evoke today's world, with scary allusions sprinkled throughout to the Iraq war, Abu Ghraib, the Holocaust, and more.

THE BEST BIT Aided by a little CG trickery, Cuarón and his cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki, deliver some of the coolest tracking shots in the history of cinema—the best being a jaw-dropping, four-minute action sequence built around a carjacking attempt on a remote forest road. —GK



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FIREFLY/SERENITY 2002/2005

CREATED BY Joss Whedon

In 2002, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon attempted to reinvent the space opera with a rough-and-tumble vision of the future set in an Earth-colonized galaxy. Part Western, part sci-fi, wholly unique, *Firefly* starred Nathan Fillion as the captain of *Serenity*, one of those dumpy old ships that don't look like much but get the job done. The TV series tracked the misadventures of his morally ambiguous crew as they tried to make an occasionally honest living by hauling cargo, stealing stuff, and accidentally helping their fellow man. The show was smart, funny, and wonderfully human, and because this is

Joss Whedon we're talking about, it also had a high-kicking, superpowered wonder woman. *Firefly* was strange. *Firefly* shouldn't have worked. And it didn't. *Firefly* was canceled after 11 episodes...

POP CULTURE LEGACY

...only to be revived in 2005 as the feature film *Serenity*, thanks to the tenacity of Whedon, the surprise success of *Firefly* on DVD, and a small army of Internet-based supporters.

THE BEST BIT Saddle up for the show, to see how it all started, and the movie, to see the ending. Then pray that someday, some studio exec will have the guts to make more. —JJ



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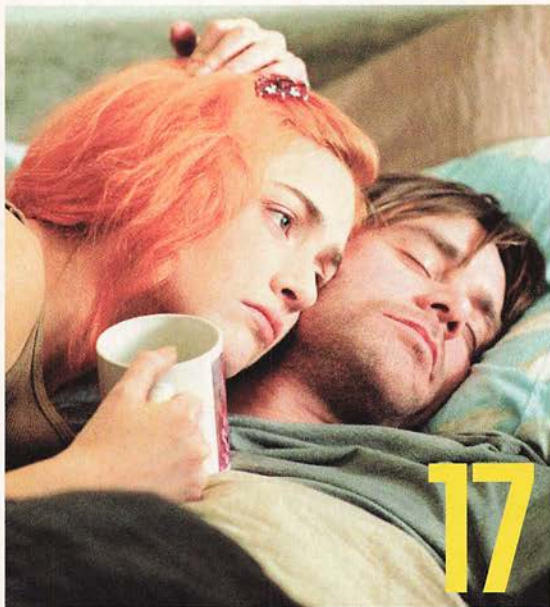
TOTAL RECALL 1990

DIRECTED BY Paul Verhoeven

"If I'm not me, whodahell am I?" Excellent question, Mr. Schwarzenegger. Science fiction has always been a genre steeped in pretzel-logic story lines, but this adaptation of Philip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" is so Escher-like in its twistiness, you'll have to watch it more than once for all the pieces to snap into place. Arnold plays a futuristic regular Joe who gets a memory implant to simulate a Mars vacation. But messing with his noggin triggers an unknown cloak-and-dagger past involving bullet-riddled double crosses, a three-breasted Martian prostitute, and a rebel leader named Kuato—a Yoda-ish homunculus growing out of some dude's chest. It makes sense...honest.

POP CULTURE LEGACY The mating of big-action heroics and heady philosophical musings in a movie that went on to make a fortune paved the way for other Thinking Man blockbusters like *The Matrix*.

THE BEST BIT It's tough to top Schwarzenegger mind-melding with the shriveled Kuato...but Arnold pulling a tracking device out of his skull—through his nose—comes close. —CN



ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND 2004

DIRECTED BY Michel Gondry

Sure, you could write this off as a postmodern love story, but anything that involves thought-control experiments administered via a giant silver brain scanner is most definitely science fiction. As Joel (Jim Carrey) struggles against his hasty decision to erase his memories of ex-girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet), we're plunged into a fluid, shape-shifting universe that only enhances writer Charlie Kaufman's reputation as the King of the Mind-fraks.

POP CULTURE LEGACY After two similarly experimental movies—*Adaptation* and *Being John Malkovich*—*Sunshine* cemented “Kaufman-esque” as the new “Tarantino-esque.” More importantly, it carried on the best this-world-is-not-what-you-think-it-is sci-fi traditions while making them palatable to fanboys and their tissue-wielding girlfriends.

THE BEST BIT All credit to Gondry for using dazzling theatrical effects and the simplest of settings—like a frozen lake—to make Joel's memory erasure so powerful and poignant. The image that packs the most punch? Joel standing in the living room of an abandoned beach house, remembering the day he and Clem first met, as walls crumble and the ocean swirls around his feet. —WP



HEROES 2006–Present

CREATED BY Tim Kring

A living, breathing comic book about a collection of people whose genetic evolution has led to extraordinary powers, *Heroes* takes the supernatural and both rationalizes and humanizes it. Thus does the office drudge (Masi Oka) bend time and space, the politician (Adrian Pasdar) learn to fly, and the cheerleader (Hayden Panettiere) become indestructible. As their stories intersect and an apocalypse looms, the blurry line between good and evil comes down to a battle for self-control. Can't say you don't identify with that.

POP CULTURE LEGACY If the hallmark of serial sci-fi on TV is its frequent inability to finish what it starts, *Heroes* is groundbreaking for asking and answering compelling questions. And while it has yet to be determined whether saving the cheerleader will, in fact, save the world, it's certainly taken steps toward saving NBC.

THE BEST BIT The still-in-progress first season rolled out flashy effects, gory dismemberments, and doomsday visions, but Oka's gleeful cheer when he managed to teleport to Times Square trumps them all. It was the cry of a normal dude who just realized his entire world was forever changed...and it's that transformation that keeps us riveted. —WP



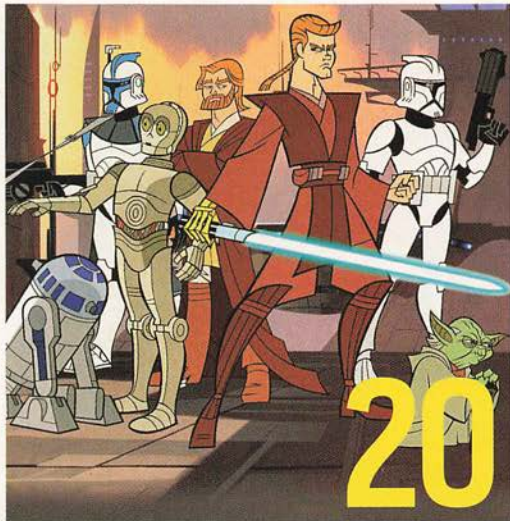
19 STARSHIP TROOPERS 1997

DIRECTED BY Paul Verhoeven

Easily the most love-it-or-hate-it film on this list, *Starship Troopers* is like one of those inkblots in a shrink's office. Do you see a dangerous slab of fascist propaganda? Or a deliciously campy parody of mindless jingoism? Plenty of critics thought it was the former—and they need to lighten up. Verhoeven turns Robert A. Heinlein's 1959 novel into a cheeky episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210*-in-space, as beefcake hero Casper Van Dien pitches woo to cheesecake heroine Denise Richards while intergalactic doughboys (and girls) reduce a race of giant alien insects to Day-Glo guts.

POP CULTURE LEGACY Like the anti-Communist sci-fi allegories of the '50s, *Starship Troopers* had more on its mind than squashing alien bugs. As he did in *RoboCop*, Verhoeven uses hammy TV clips and recruitment videos—"Would you like to know more?"—to show just how plausible this right-wing future is. But rather than endorsing it, he's satirizing it.

THE BEST BIT Doogie Howser (a.k.a. Neil Patrick Harris) in an SS trench coat reading the mind of the captured Brain Bug: "It's afraid...it's afraid!" —CN



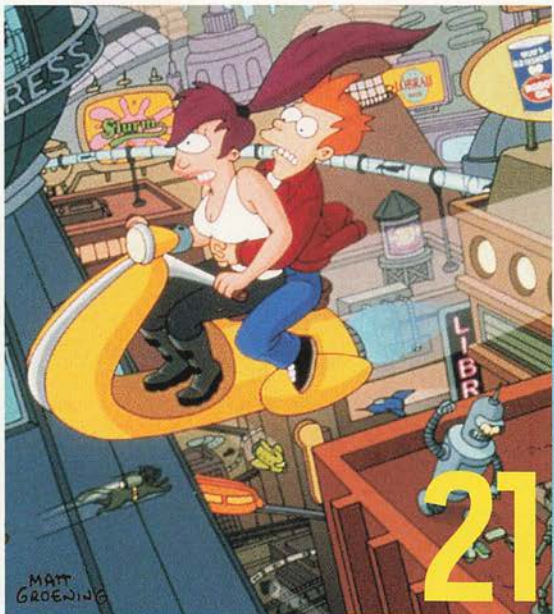
20 STAR WARS: CLONE WARS 2003–2005

DIRECTED BY Genndy Tartakovsky

The most painful thing about confining this list to the last 25 years was that we couldn't include either *Star Wars* or *The Empire Strikes Back*, both of which were too old. And that left *Return of the Jedi* and the prequel trilogy—which no one in our Brain Trust could work up any enthusiasm for. But then we remembered *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, the series of animated shorts that aired on Cartoon Network. The creation of animator Genndy Tartakovsky (*The Powerpuff Girls*, *Samurai Jack*), *Clone Wars* fills in the story gap between *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*, and fleshes out how Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker battled against the separatist forces of evil.

POP CULTURE LEGACY There's an abundance of style and storytelling economy here that was, sadly, absent from the George Lucas-directed prequels. Sometimes, if you let the talented kids into the sandbox without telling them *exactly* how to play, the results can be surprising.

THE BEST BIT Volume 2. Even though volume 1 is almost wall-to-wall action, the five shorts in volume 2 cover a lot more ground, and lead directly into *Episode III*. (Better yet, just get both. They're pretty cheap.) —MB



FUTURAMA 1999–2003

CREATED BY Matt Groening and David X. Cohen

The Simpsons plus sci-fi? This combo is more alluring to a geek than watching a *Twilight Zone* marathon on whippets. With the adventures of Fry, a 20th-century nitwit thawed out of a deep freeze in 2999, Groening's writers married sharp Simpsonian gags with denser story lines, dazzling animated visuals, and knowing nerd humor. (A voice cameo by *Dungeons & Dragons* creator Gary Gygax and jokes written in BASIC computer language? Talk about downloading right into your pleasure center!) But for all the hilarity of Fry's misanthropic robot pal Bender, the creativity on display was no joke: *Futurama* created a fantastically complete and unique world that rivals anything else in the 30th century. **POP CULTURE LEGACY** While Fox constantly moved the show (and sometimes dropped it from the schedule for long periods), the low-rated comedy finally got the passionate fan base it deserved when reruns began appearing on Cartoon Network in 2003. Groening and Co. are now working on four *Futurama* DVD movies, which may be broken into episodes and aired on Comedy Central in 2008.

THE BEST BIT The zippy third season. One highlight: Cyclops warrior Leela falls for Fry after "intelligent worms" infest his body, making him smarter and stronger. —JW



QUANTUM LEAP 1989–1993

CREATED BY Donald P. Bellisario

A stirring drama touching on issues such as race, feminism, and homophobia, *Leap* cloaked its social commentary in the guise of time-traveling goodness. The premise was uncomplicated: An experiment gone awry sends scientist Dr. Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) bouncing through time, inhabiting the lives, and bodies, of folks from the last 60 years. Only by saving the downtrodden, with the aid of holographic pal Al (Dean Cain), can the good doc leap into the next adventure and, maybe, leap home. Bakula was a wonder portraying everyone from an elderly African-American man to a pregnant teenage girl to Elvis Presley, but much credit goes to creator Don Bellisario, who reminded us with each nuanced episode that the human condition—and the comic appeal of cross-dressing—is timeless. **POP CULTURE LEGACY** The show was regular-folk friendly: A lack of high-tech gizmos, technobabble, and aliens helped ease sci-fi back into the mainstream after an extended drought in prime-time television. **THE BEST BIT** Season 2's "Catch a Falling Star" let Bakula flaunt his Broadway background, as Sam leaped into an actor playing Don Quixote in *Man of La Mancha*. —Paul Katz

(THIS PAGE) FUTURAMA: 20TH-CENTURY FOX; QUANTUM LEAP: PETER JONING; (OPPOSITE PAGE) GALEXY QUEST: MURRAY CLOSE; V: THE ORIGINAL; MINISERIES: MPV.NET



DOCTOR WHO 1963–Present

DEVELOPED BY Sydney Newman

The BBC's timeless *Doctor Who* is a 44-year argument for proper sci-fi priorities: (1) an ecstatically tangled, infinitely renewable story line and (2) an understanding that all science fiction, however time- and space-spanning, is local. (Top-flight special effects? Not, as it turns out, crucial.) The Doctor, a Time Lord, powerful but dispossessed, hops worlds and epochs like subway stops, but in spirit he never really leaves London.

POP CULTURE LEGACY With its playful yet sincere commitment to social allegory, *Doctor Who* has always been a post-empire fantasy—unerringly progressive, but wary, dark, and full of doubts about human goodness.

THE BEST BIT Check out the first season of the newest incarnation, featuring *Heroes*' Christopher Eccleston as the ninth Doctor (the best ever—apologies to Tom Baker) and the piercing, poignant wit of writer Russell T. Davies. —Scott Brown



GALAXY QUEST 1999

DIRECTED BY Dean Parisot

In this pitch-perfect parody, the cast of a canceled cult TV show much like *Star Trek*—featuring an egocentric commander (Tim Allen), his alien sidekick (Alan Rickman), and a buxom lieutenant (Sigourney Weaver)—gets enlisted to help save an alien race, who, thanks to intercepted broadcasts, think the actors are real space-faring heroes. **POP CULTURE LEGACY** It seamlessly stitched together sci-fi clichés with adventure and nostalgia (not mockery). **THE BEST BIT** Sam Rockwell's cocky “red shirt,” killed in his first and only episode of the TV show, who spends most of the film fretting over whether he'll get bumped off for real. —Erin Richter



V: THE MINISERIES 1983

CREATED BY Kenneth Johnson

Giant fascist lizards from outer space—it sounds like something you'd see on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. But this parable of tolerance is far more complex and frightening than it seems. While the “Visitors” say they “come in peace,” they really want to drain Earth's water supply. Just in case you still don't get the point, their insignia looks suspiciously like a swastika.

POP CULTURE LEGACY Besides spawning an equally engaging sequel—1984's *V: The Final Battle*—V gave Robert Englund (a.k.a. Freddy Krueger) his big break.

THE BEST BIT In one of the best TV reveals ever, lizard queen Diana (Jane Badler)—still disguised as a sultry brunet human—unhinges her jaw and stuffs an entire guinea pig in her hideously elongated piehole. —Kristen Baldwin