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Superhero action scenes

The Marvel Cinematic Universe may have become the biggest franchise in movie history, but it can be hard to shake the feeling that the series' most visionary action took place in boardrooms, rather than on the big screen. Despite the sheer scale of this 22-film saga, and the dozens of easily distinguishable characters it contains, many of the Avengers' planet-saving battles are kind of pedestrian - partly because most of the main set pieces were pre-visualized on a corporate level before a director was even hired to handle the rest of their respective chapter. And yet, between nearly two dozen superhero movies and several billion dollars in production budgets, the MCU delivered a handful of spectacular battles. For every boring and unimaginative melee, there is an inspired bit of comic chaos; For every horrible Hulk fight outside the Apollo, there was a thunderous smackdown on Sakaar. For every Mortal Kombat-looking thorn in sight on the subway tracks under Wakanda, there was a breathless collision amid the falls above. Now, with Avengers: Endgame set to round off this peerlessly ambitious bit of cinematic synergy, we have a spoiler-free flashback (and slightly forward) on the 10 best fight scenes at the MCU. 10. Attack on the tarmac (Captain America: Civil War) If The Avengers proved that the MCU could work, Captain America: Civil War suggested how it might expand. With Earth's most powerful heroes in a philosophical deadlock and divided into two groups, the Russo brothers forced all 12 of them into direct conflict via a battle royale at a (completely deserted) Berlin airport, which turns out to be a very unseemly backdrop for a battle royale. The action itself is often uninspired, and it undermines the urgency that even some of the characters don't know why they're fighting each other (Ant-Man's hostility to Tony Stark makes no sense, given the circumstances). But boring execution doesn't get in the way of this sequence feeling like a comic book coming to life. What the brawl lacks in artistry, makes up for it in ambition. Of course, it's a testament to the scale of Infinity War and Endgame that the airport battle - once seen as an all-you-can-eat buffet of superhero geekery - now feels about as satisfying as bar nuts on an empty stomach. At least until a quick exchange between two New Yorkers gives the fight some life of its own. 9. A Salt Shakeup (Ant-Man and the Wasp) The Ant-Man movies sometimes feel like the forgotten stepchildren of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but that just means they can mess around unsupervised. The Guardians of the Galaxy get their own pleasure, but Peyton Reed works on a whole other level of silliness. Case in point: The Wasp disabling an accomplice by enlarging a salt. That's just one of several dizzying moments in the two-part Ant-Man and the Wasp battle scene that introduces the movie's seriously cool-looking villain, and ups the ante ante ante everything that worked in the previous movie. Here's just a few of the zany goodness that's included in this order: Evangeline Lilly phasing through matter! Walton Goggins gets confused! The wasp runs along the side of a kitchen knife! Paul Rudd and Michael Douglas act very concerned from a safe distance! And the whole thing only gets more fun when Ant-Man and Ghost are brought into the mix, because the various matter-changing sound effects are built into a glitchy symphony of well-choreographed destruction. 8. Going Down (Captain America: The Winter Soldier) Marvel obsessives want to pretend to be Captain America: Winter Soldier is a sort of Alan J. Pakula-inspired riff on the paranoid thrillers of the 70s, and... Sorry, but no. Find another way to validate your fandom. Be that as it may, the Russo brothers' first at-bat occasionally manages to harness a tighter, more suspicious energy than any of the other films in the series, and that's never clearer than in the film's eye-catching elevator battle, when Steve Rogers is forced to deal with a dozen Hydra spies in a glass elevator on U.S. government grounds. The build-up to the fists is wonderfully tense, as Steve begins to feel as if he's surrounded by the enemy (a heartbreaking realization for a trusting patriot like Captain America). And then, the First Avenger sets the stage for some close quarters fight: Before we start, he asks: Does anyone want out? Unfortunately, no one takes him on what - in retrospect - was an extremely generous offer. The fighting itself is a bit choppy, but it is also limited; it only gets better once the bodies hit the ground, and Cap finds some room to start flipping out. The Russos' best touch is a top-down shot that surveys the carnage, and gives us the perfect view for one of the franchise's most satisfying shield-kicks. Word to the wise: Don't fight Steve Rogers. If Tony Stark couldn't beat him, neither could you. 7. Portals! (Thor: The Dark World) The closest the movies have ever come to replicating the mind-breaking madness of the Portal video games (sorry, Incredibles 2), Thor: The Dark World might get a bad rap, but the climactic battle has all sorts of fun poking holes in the space-time continuum, and laying the groundwork for Thanos' favorite War Infinity tricks in the process. As Malekith and his army teleport from Dark Elves to Greenwich, Thor is forced to fight them through a series of interdimensional portals that suck cars on distant alien planets and turn Mjolnir into the world's most determined homing rocket. Superhero movies rarely get cooler than the shot of Thor's hammer screaming down the side of the Gherrk, or crazier than the shot of Thor and Malekith sliding off the glass exterior of the egg-shaped building. Doctor Strange later do even more to warp big earth cities into fantastic battlefields, but this portal battle proved that even the most hackneyed Marvel movies moments of innovative magic. 6. Melee in the Mirror Dimension (Doctor Strange) Doctor Strange, more than perhaps any other film in the MCU, depends on special effects to sell itself. Sure, other movies in the franchise have computer-generated main characters, but this one depends on warping the world we know in one that we don't; taking the familiar pieces of our reality and transforming them into something completely new. In other words, if Doctor Strange's awe-inspiring journey through the Mirror Dimension didn't look cool, the whole movie would have felt like a missed opportunity. Don't worry. Diving into the Mirror Dimension headfirst, Scott Derrickson and his special effects team shot New York City through a kaleidoscope, creating a magical puzzle of new possibilities as the evil Kaecilius leads Doctor Strange and his close friend Mordo on an exciting (and fatal) chase through Manhattan that feels like a massively scaled-up version of the gang battle of Inception. Typical superhero battle is transformed by a city that falls apart on its own, while busy avenues turn into M.C. Escher paintings, buildings dance and bend, and the basic structure of reality begins to collapse on its own (the scene gives a whole new meaning to the idea of Doctors Without Borders). The contrast between Strange (who tries not to surrender) and Kaecilius (who doesn't think twice about walking upside down along the bottom of a catwalk) creates an arresting imbalance, and the sequence only shifts to a higher gear once Tilda Swinton drops in for one of the MCU's most fluently choreographed fights; The Russo brothers should be very grateful that Derrickson found a way to make astral magic feel so tactile. It also doesn't hurt that the fracas ends with a sharp punch on the gut that resonates all the way through Endgame. 5. Yondu Escapes (Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2) You would never expect a man who calls himself Taserface to make bad decisions, but that's exactly what the space operator did when he captured Yondu, Rocket Raccoon and Baby Groot aboard the Ravager ship he recently claimed as his own. And so begins one of the most playful and cartoonishly violent sequences in the MCU, as Yondu's whistle-controlled arrow rips through a legion of henchmen, while Jay and the Americans bops 'Come a Little Bit Closer' on the soundtrack. It's a wonderful bit of anarchy from start to finish, and one that fills director James Gunn with all sorts of fun grace notes. There's the way the bad guys' bodies dance before they fall to the ground dead, and how Yondu drapes the torso in red neon ribbon, as if controlled by a particularly anarchic little child scribbling a hot death in their coloring book. Not only is the order a perfect of speed-ramping well done, it also embodies the airy swagger of the entire Guardians of the Galaxy series, and inspires an unexpected affection for Yondu that will come in handy a one Later. 4. T'Challa vs. M'Baku (Black Panther) Much of the action in Black Panther is just not up to the standard that Ryan Coogler set for himself in Creed - it's too chaotic, too choppy, and too clearly computer-generated within an inch of his life. Even great emerging authors are still at the mercy of Marvel's assembly line approach. But this time, that almost doesn't matter: Black Panther is so richly conceived, so character-driven, and so full of life that the battle scenes can afford to be a means to an end. And that's exactly what the ritual pitch between T'Challa and M'Baku will be, as the first-act scuffle for the Wakandan throne is not only a bruising clash for dominance at the edge of a waterfall, it's also a fitting intro to a culture where tradition and modernity are bound together with violent beauty. The Killmonger brawl that comes later may seem to have higher stakes, but this first fight is even more important for how it introduces the incredible world of Wakanda, and makes clear what T'Challa is fighting to protect. And the percussive power of Ludwig Göransson's instantly iconic score is just icing on the cake. 3. The Final Battle (Avengers: Endgame) We can't tell you who's fighting. Or where they fight. Or what they're fighting. But we can tell you that the climactic battle at the end of Avengers: Endgame does a rousing job of bringing the whole MCU saga together in the biggest melee in superhero movie history. And while the Russo brothers don't have the chops to make things as balletic and coherent as Joss Whedon does on his best day - and they've once again found the greyest, dullest backdrop for their big action moments - the grand finale is an impossibly massive spectacle full of timely hero moments. 2. Iron Man is forged (Iron Man) For genius billionaire playboy philanthropist (and trader of war) Tony Stark, guns was always a means to a purpose - what they did to other people didn't do as much as what they did for his bottom line. That all changed when the egomaniacal showboat was locked in a cave by some Afghan terrorists and forced to build the most destructive weapon he had ever built. Thanks to some desperate circumstances and the kind-hearted Doctor Yinsen, that moment is when Stark began to appreciate the true human cost of his actions, and the need to protect the people he puts at risk. It's a transformation dramatic enough to galvanize the greatest cinematic universe ever conceived, and Jon Favreau shot it with all the explosive energy it deserves. From the little grace notes that keep Tony's escape to the ground (like the bullet ricocheting off the cave walls), to the undeniably practical volcanic explosions that erupt as he uses the makeshift iron suit to fight away, the sequence captures the pleasure and fury of a hero forged from the darkness. 1. The Battle of New York (The Avengers) The Battle of New York is its Down, the biggest action set piece in the dense (if short) history of superhero movies. And it had to be. The Avengers was the first real put-up-or-shut-up moment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe - the film that would either galvanize this great experiment as visionary corporate synergy or prove that spandex could only stretch so far - and much of that legacy was always going to rest on the climactic battle scene that brought all of the franchise heroes together. Needless to say, Joss Whedon nailed it. As the Avengers finally come together to fight the Chitauri and seal the portal opened in the skies above Manhattan, Whedon delivers a perfect hero moment after a perfect hero moment, drawing them into a series of fluid, computer-assisted long-takes that illustrate so well that the Avengers work together as a team. Nearly 20 movies later, the MCU still hasn't topped the thrill of Black Widow fighting at the foot of Grand Central Station, while Iron Man zips up, Hawkeye offers rooftop coverage, Captain America flips over some cars, Thor brings the thunder, and Hulk smashes. The individual moments are all killer (Hulk punching Thor remains an all-timer), while the shot of the Avengers circling in formation is still the clearest expression of the series' core ethos. And while that would all be enough to earn the Battle of New York the top spot on this list, it certainly doesn't hurt that Kevin Feige and co. recognized the impact of the sequence, and made it the emotional cornerstone of the next two phases. Sign up: Stay up to date with the latest news about movies and TV! Sign up for our email newsletters here. Here.