



# FX: Building Illusions

WITH JIM SOTO

**Behold...Trinity escapes!**

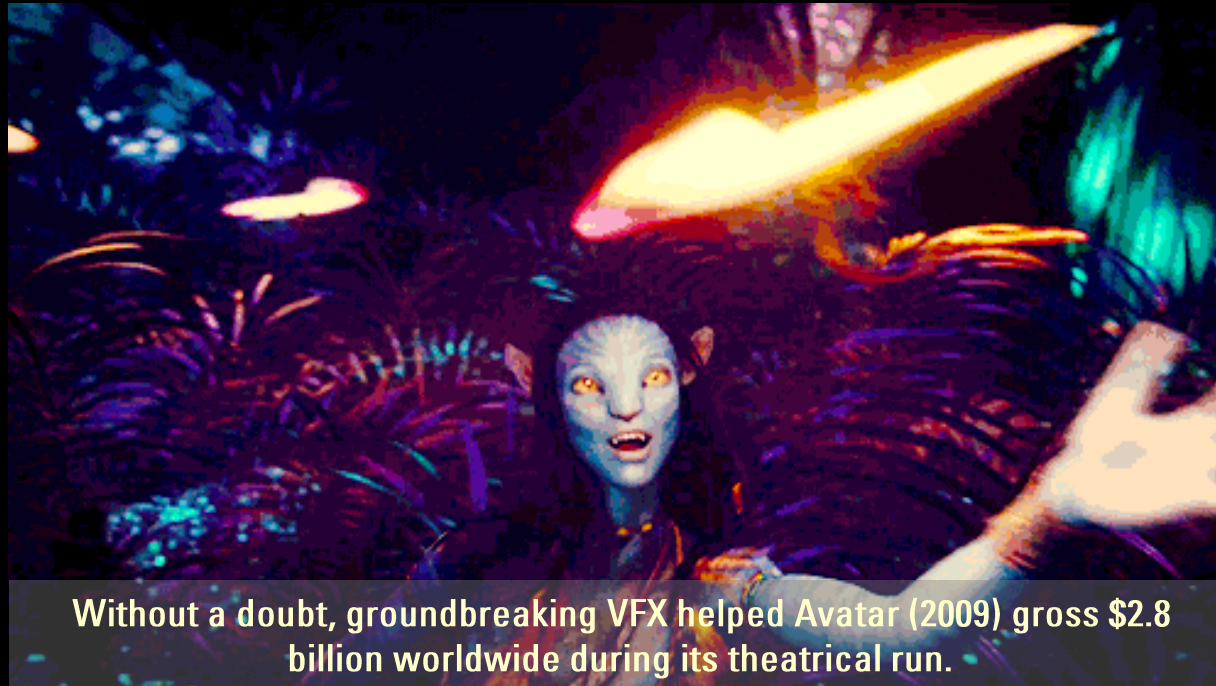
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**Behold...Trinity escapes!... Behind the scenes.**

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You only need look at the 50 highest grossing films of all time to see that Special and Visual Effects (SFX and VFX) have become a staple of Hollywood films. SFX and VFX have become their bread and butter. By 2010, Avatar, a film which makes heavy use of fx, had amassed almost **3 BILLION DOLLARS**. That is serious money!



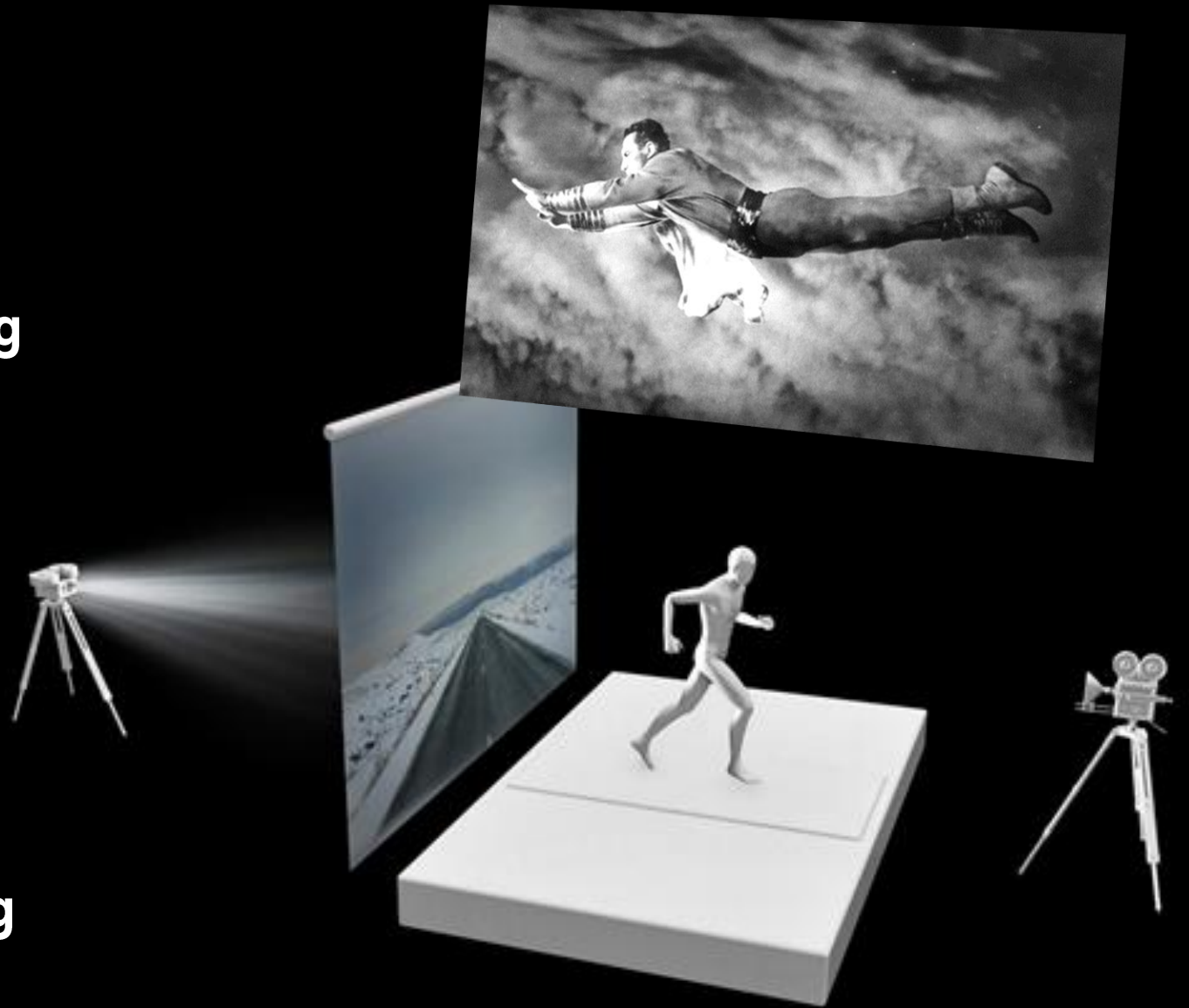
Without a doubt, groundbreaking VFX helped Avatar (2009) gross \$2.8 billion worldwide during its theatrical run.

# WHY SFX/VFX?



Some movie scenes need special effects (sfx) or visual effects (vfx), which are artificial visual or mechanical effects introduced into them because they require elements that would be too dangerous, impractical, or even impossible to shoot in real life.

The earliest special visual effects were created through special camera lenses or through tricks such as projecting a moving background behind the actors. Greater flexibility came with the development of the optical printer, which made it possible to combine separate pieces of film and replace part of an image, thus allowing for effects such as characters flying through the air.





Special effects have also been created mechanically on the set through the use of devices such as wires, explosives, and puppets and by building miniature models to simulate epic scenes such as battles.



The growing use of computer animation and computer-generated imagery has produced increasingly elaborate and realistic visual effects. Though each movie studio formerly had its own special-effects department, effects are now created by private companies such as:



1. **ILM** - *Star Wars* & *Jurassic Park* franchises
2. **WETA DIGITAL** - *Lord of the Rings* & *Avatar*
3. **DIGITAL DOMAIN** - *Titanic* & *RRR*
4. **ZOIC STUDIOS** - *Twilight* & *Avengers: Age of Ultron*
5. **DOUBLE NEGATIVE** - *Harry Potter* films & *Inception*
6. **FRAMESTORE LONDON** - *Clash of the Titans* & *Barbie*
7. **SONY IMAGE WORKS** - *Watchmen* & *Alice in Wonderland*
8. **RHYTHM & HUES FX** - *Life of Pi* & *X-Men*
9. **RODEO FX** - *John Wick 4* & *Dune: Part 2*
10. **ANIMAL LOGIC** - *The LEGO Movie* & *300*

# WHEN TO USE SFX/VFX?



Filmmakers have used cameras to create trickery and delight audiences since the inception of the camera. Creating magic and illusions is one of the most exciting tools in the filmmaking arsenal, and special and visual effects (SFX and VFX) can be the juice that enhance films.

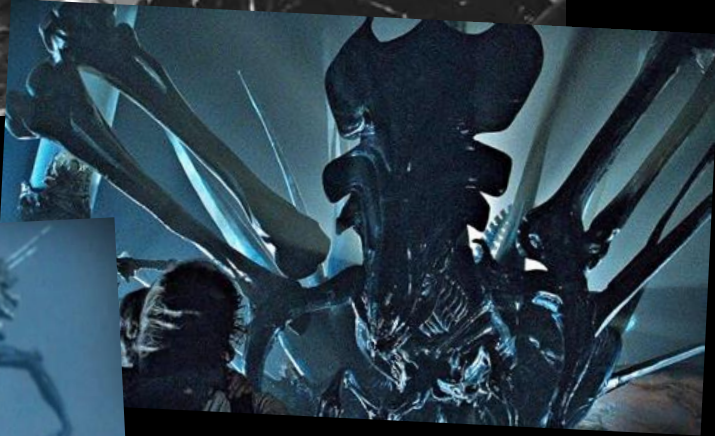
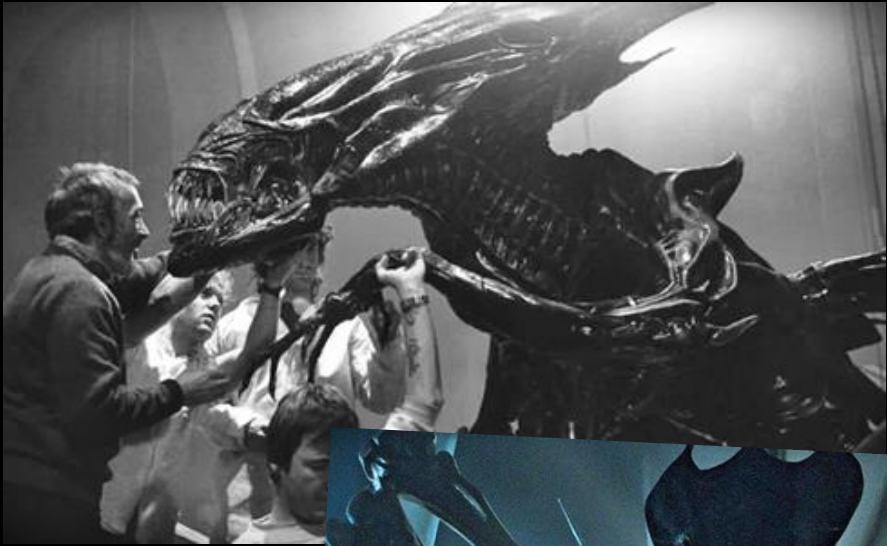
Some of the earliest movie sfx can be credited to Georges Méliès, who pioneered the use of the “stop trick.” For this little bit of magic, the camera is shut off, all the performers freeze, the scenery or set dressing is changed, and filming is resumed. Many early films had characters disappear or scenes suddenly change with this effect.



**Méliès created numerous other sfx using multiple exposures, time-lapse photography, animation, and hand-painted color. From there, the world of film expanded into hundreds of other methods of sfx wizardry, leading to the development of visual effects.**

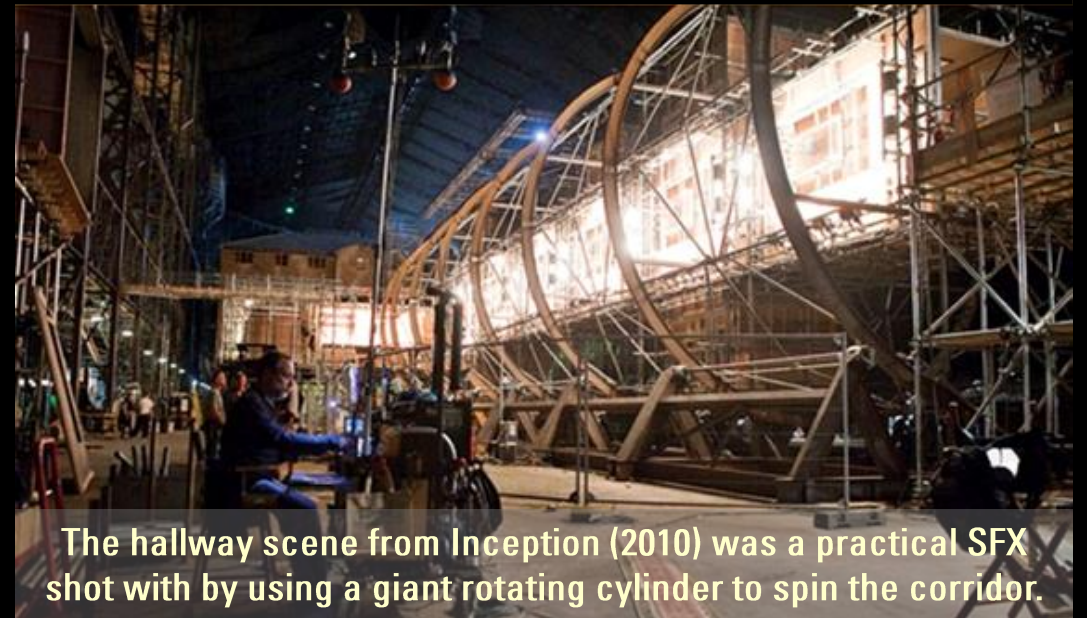


Special effects and visual effects are often conflated, but are different. While there are other subcategories, sfx are often practical, meaning that they are created on set (e.g., a controlled explosion in an action scene). Conversely, vfx are created in post-production or the editing bay. Early visual effects saw filmmakers toying with film stock, while modern visual effects deal in animation, computer generated imagery and other post-production effects.



Above, the practical animatronic alien queen from *Aliens* (1986) and to the left, a CGI version in *Alien v Predator* (2004).

Both have strengths and weaknesses. Sfx can be preferable in many instances, because actors can respond to the effects on set, and you get lighting effects and other features you would otherwise have to create digitally, often at great expense. However, sfx often require specialized equipment, trained professionals, and careful choreography, which can be challenging for many filmmakers.



The hallway scene from Inception (2010) was a practical SFX shot with by using a giant rotating cylinder to spin the corridor.



Vfx, on the other hand, open boundless visual possibilities to a filmmaker, the only limit being technical competence and creative vision (or the technology no yet existing).

# RESHOOT

1. Why would a movie need special and/or visual effects?
2. What technology has produced increasingly elaborate and realistic effects?
3. Mention four FX companies and a film they produced.
4. Explain two differences between SFX and VFX.
5. Mention one advantage of one over the other.
6. Mention a disadvantage of one over the other.



Next:

**MORE FX**

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