

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST



THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ADVERSITY IS as essential to storytelling as a foundation is for building a house. Life-or-death stakes certainly up the ante. Then there is the central conflict of simply staying alive. There is an endgame, of course—to realize one’s hopes and dreams, exact justice, help prevent the kinds of unfortunate circumstances that placed the protagonist in their predicament in the first place—otherwise there is no light at the end of the tunnel. In the following films, survival is the central conceit: against the elements, natural disaster, villainous thugs, cosmic indifference. And it’s getting through the ordeal that constitutes the bulk of the drama. In other words, survival isn’t just a means to an end, it is everything. **[BY STEVE CHAGOLLAN]**

GRAVITY (2013)

► Alfonso Cuarón

When a torrent of space debris all but destroys a space shuttle and leaves her stranded alone with her oxygen running out, Sandra Bullock’s astronaut must find a way to get back to Earth. Cuarón, who won a DGA Award and an Oscar for the film, said the possibility of rebirth was the point of the film—“a character who has to reconnect to her inner nurturing side.”

INTO THE WILD
(2007)

► Sean Penn

Emile Hirsch plays the real-life Christopher McCandless, who decided to eschew material comforts, drop out of society and survive on his wits in the Alaskan wilderness. In one interview, Penn posed the film's central questions: "Do you want to live—and I don't mean stay alive—do you want to feel your life while living it?" In a country he called "comfort-addicted," he was drawn to McCandless' uncompromising rite of passage, however doomed.



"You make the film as authentically as you know how, and if you make judgments with open-mindedness, complexities emerge."

—PAUL GREENGRASS



CAPTAIN PHILLIPS
(2013)

► Paul Greengrass

In this film about a containership seized by Somali pirates and the captain who relies on his wits to ensure that his crew survives the ordeal, Greengrass applies his docudrama style to another heady life-or-death experience. "You make the film as authentically as you know how," said Greengrass, "and if you make judgments with a spirit of open-mindedness, complexities emerge."



PHOTOS: (TOP) EVERETT; (BOTTOM) PHOTOFEEST (2)



"[I wanted to make] a radically visual experience, a physical experience more than an intellectual one."

—ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU



PHOTOS: (TOP) PHOTOFEEST; (BOTTOM) EVERETT

THE REVENANT
(2015)

► Alejandro González Iñárritu

In this brutally realistic revenge saga, a fur trapper (Leonardo DiCaprio) is left for dead after being mauled by a grizzly bear. In exploring the themes of survival, Iñárritu—who won the DGA Award and an Oscar for his pains—said he wanted the movie to be a "radically visual experience, a physical experience more than an intellectual one, where people can live it from the extreme point of view of the character."

SAN ANDREAS
(2015)

► Brad Peyton

After a record earthquake in California causes massive devastation from San Francisco to Los Angeles, an LAFD helicopter pilot must rescue his estranged wife and daughter from certain death. "When I started to make the movie," said Peyton, "I wasn't focused on making a disaster movie. I was really focused on the family element, on the lead characters. I tried to stay away from influences and make my own film."



EVEREST
(2015)

► Baltasar Kormákur

Kormákur's credo was "let's do everything we possibly can in the elements," and so filming took place both in Nepal and in the Dolomites, which doubled for the Himalayas. In recounting the doomed twin expeditions to the summit of Everest in 1996, Kormákur filmed as high as 16,000 feet in temperatures as low as minus 22 degrees Fahrenheit. "The volume of those mountains is immense," said Kormákur, "and I was humbled by them."



PHOTOS: (TOP & BOTTOM LEFT) EVERETT; (BOTTOM RIGHT) UNIVERSAL PICTURES



PHOTOS: (TOP) EVERETT; (BOTTOM) PHOTOFEEST

ALL IS LOST
(2013)

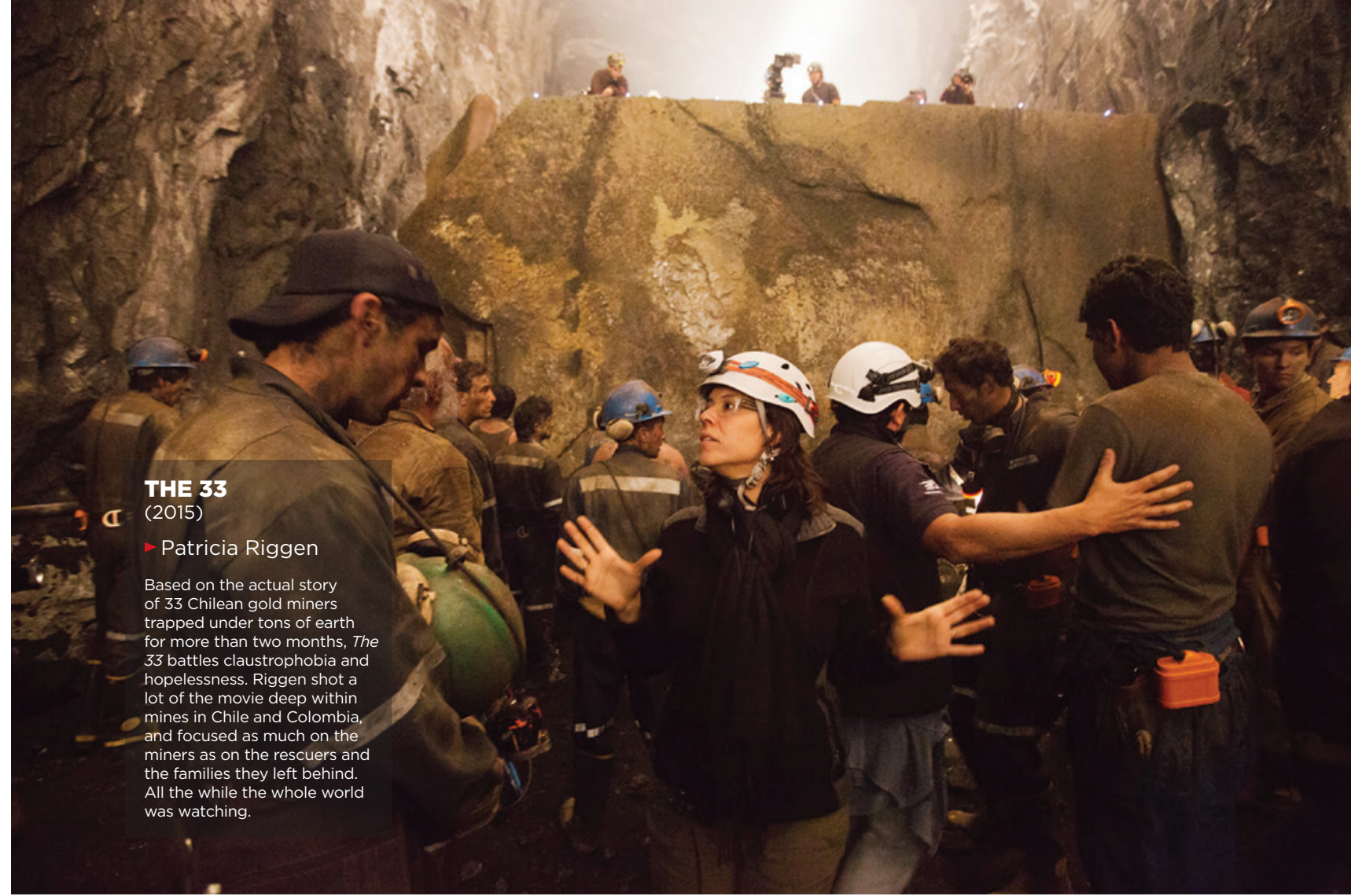
► J.C. Chandor

Chandor's second feature—about a mariner stranded at sea after the hull of his yacht is gashed by a shipping container—is practically dialog-free, with the unnamed protagonist (played by Robert Redford) spending most of its running time trying to stay afloat, and alive. While making the film, Chandor "realized I was learning a lot about my own views on life and what's important about it and how I would like it to end, and things I don't want to be left unsaid when that end comes."

THE 33
(2015)

► Patricia Riggen

Based on the actual story of 33 Chilean gold miners trapped under tons of earth for more than two months, *The 33* battles claustrophobia and hopelessness. Riggen shot a lot of the movie deep within mines in Chile and Colombia, and focused as much on the miners as on the rescuers and the families they left behind. All the while the whole world was watching.





CAST AWAY (2000)

► Robert Zemeckis

After enduring a terrifying plane crash, Tom Hanks, playing a FedEx employee, is marooned on a deserted South Pacific island. The bulk of the movie chronicles his efforts to stay alive, and with no rescuers in the cards, his attempts to get back to civilization. In order to effectively convey the toll on Hanks' character, Zemeckis shut down the production for several months so the actor could lose considerable weight.



APOCALYPTO
(2006)

► Mel Gibson

Gibson's pre-Columbian saga—about a tribesman who escapes human sacrifice while attempting to rescue his family after the destruction of their village—not only examines internecine warfare, but hints at the looming threat to Mayan civilization posed by the Spanish conquistadors. Gibson defined the film's title as “a new beginning... unfortunately, to have a new beginning something else has to end.”

“[What was amazing to me was that Solomon Northup] was able to hold onto his faith in humanity.” —STEVE McQUEEN



12 YEARS A SLAVE
(2013)

► Steve McQueen

Based on Solomon Northup's 1853 memoir, McQueen's film addresses the unspeakable horrors and hardship endured by slaves on plantations in Louisiana. The experience was especially difficult for Northup, given that he started out as a free man in the North. What was compelling about Northup, said McQueen, “was that he was able to hold onto his faith in humanity.”



127 HOURS
(2010)

► Danny Boyle

“The isolation of this individual was an intriguing challenge to me,” said Boyle about the protagonist of *127 Hours*, based on the autobiography of mountain climber Aron Ralston, who became trapped by a boulder in the Utah wilderness for five days. The director had to adjust his methodology to work largely with one actor (James Franco). “You have to give them a lot of the control,” he said. “Because if you try to manipulate them too much, you can see that they're doing what they've been told rather than finding it themselves.”

PHOTOS: PHOTOFEST