THE BIG ISSUE

COULD 2015 BE ANOTHER LANDMARK YEAR FOR BLOCKBUSTER VFX?

Will a triumphant return for familiar franchises inspire a new generation of artists? ***Tom May*** asks the experts their views...

It's safe to say 2015 is shaping up to be a landmark year for visual effects. Thanks to a combination of technological advances, the growing maturity of the VFX industry, and a craving for the familiar from austerity-weary audiences, the blockbuster franchises of the past are returning with a vengeance. Classic series like Terminator, Jurassic Park and Star Wars are back, with bigger and better visual effects than ever – all in stereoscopic 3D.

And whether you like or loathe them, this should all be great news for the industry. Because it's landmark VFX movies like this that tend to inspire fresh new generations to take up the 3D baton and run with it. That's exactly what happened to Aidan Sarsfield, CG supervisor at Animal Logic, when he was a student in the 1990s. "The VFX industry wasn't really accessible to me back then, it didn't really exist in Sydney," he explains. "But 1982's Blade Runner, and Syd Mead's visionary design work, helped push me towards a degree in industrial design. This was the starting point for a career imagining things and realising them in CGI." It's a pattern that repeats whoever you speak to.

For Alf Lovvold, founder of Gimpville, it was 1996's Independence Day: "Those city destruction shots are still epic," he enthuses. Freelance 3D artist Cirstyn Bech-Yagher caught the bug watching an early Godzilla movie. "I remember driving my dad crazy with questions on how they'd made the environments, some of the action sequences, and glowing jewels in their hands," she recalls. "After that, I really started having fun trying to figure, and later learning, how things like these were done."

It was the landmark movies of the late 1970s and early 1980s that remain the biggest influence on Cirstyn, though. "In five years we had Close Encounters, Alien, the Star Wars Trilogy, Indiana Jones, Blade Runner and Tron," she says. "These VFX-heavy films showed how far the envelope actually could be pushed. Alternative technology was emerging to help people visualise their stories and visions for real."

Over the top CGI

For Wyatt Savarese, 3D supervisor at The Mill in New York, it was the original Star Wars that has always remained closest to his heart.

e highly anticipated new Star Wars film hits our screens later this year with bigger and better VFX than ever

"It was the film that started it all," he explains. "If it wasn't for Star Wars and all the work that ILM did, I don't think I would be working in this industry." And he's hoping that under JJ Abrams' stewardship, Star Wars: The Force Awakens will similarly inspire a new generation.

While the prequels disappointed some, Wyatt hopes the mixture of practical effects and CG in the new movie will bring back the old magic.

This was the scene that made me hope that in my lifetime I will see a real dinosaur

Wyatt Savarese, 3D supervisor, The Mill

"I feel that if done well, this might be the rebirth of good old fashioned in-camera VFX, costumes, make-up and prosthetic," he says.

"The latest generation of films and filmmakers have oversaturated the market with over the top CGI visual effects. I'm not saying this is a bad thing, but people in the audience are way more savvy about VFX now. A good costume or prosthetic might not look 100 per cent photorealistic but it will allow the audience to make that decision to believe that it could be." The return of the Jurassic Park series also excites Wyatt, because the original 1993 movie contains his favourite ever VFX scene. "At the end of the film you have this magnificent tyrannosaurus rex in all its glory, rearing up to let out this powerful, ear-splitting roar, as the banner is falling down," he enthuses. "This was the scene that made me hope that in my lifetime I will see a real dinosaur."

We're not sure about that, but 2015 will at least see the return of the franchise in the form of Jurassic World, and Cirstyn Bech-Yagher is equally excited. "The trailer looked awesome," she says. "I loved the shot of the sarcosuchus and that they're on the verge of completing the woolly mammoth genome."

He'll be back

In the coming months we'll get all of this, plus Arnie back as the Terminator, with some clever CG making him look young again, and modern VFX breathing new life into other classic franchises, including Mad Max and Ant-Man. So could this be a vintage year for VFX that inspires a new generation to learn 3D? Given the projected skills shortage looming large across the UK industry, here's hoping...

FYI *Have your say, vote for your favourite VFX scene at* ***www.the cgawards.com***

INDUSTRY INSIDERS

The experts share their inspiration

JOHN JATTOH
Creative hybrid designer
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"My favourite VFX scene would be from Terminator, when the T-1000 has been drenched in liquid nitrogen. The way those shots were composed was genius. The fragmenting and breaking away of body parts was very impressive and I still rewind it to this day to see the particles crumbling and rejoining of the T-1000. ILM really did something groundbreaking with the T-1000. It was amazing for its time and even now something to admire. I also think it was a leap of faith on their part as it could have really looked horrible with live action but the way the whole model was lit, textured and comped into shot was very impressive."

CIRSTYN BECH-YAGHER
Freelance CG artist
northernstudios.com

"I loved the trench run in Star Wars, the T-1000 in Terminator 2, and the stampedes in Jumanji. But my favourite VFX scene is from Dead Ringers. It's the shot where you see the twins, played by Jeremy Irons, walk side by side; one in scrubs and one where he's wearing a suit. It's probably not the biggest moment in film ever. But I remember how the seamlessness made me sit up, because it looked so natural. Before that, you could pretty much always tell the split. Years later I read that they had to compensate for the (normal) walking motion sway with four different split-screen mattes, each with an average of four dissolves, which was huge at the time."

WYATT SAVARESE
3D supervisor at The Mill's New York studio.
www.themill.com

"I'm going to have to go with a few giants of the industry: the work of Willis Harold O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen. Growing up my father introduced me to their work with films like King Kong, Mighty Joe Young and Jason and the Argonauts. These early films with amazing stop motion animation set my imagination on fire. Without their early work, the industry might not be what it is today."