



How 'Ghost in the Shell' Cinematographer Gave New Life to Franchise

Valentina I. Valentini



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Taking on a remake can be daunting for a cinematographer, with pressure to honor the original but also to re-create the story and put a personal spin on it. Imagine the angst in taking on a multimedia franchise.

Such was the task of cinematographer Jess Hall, who, working with longtime friend and collaborator director Rupert Sanders, had to reimagine "Ghost in the Shell," a Japanese property that originated in 1989 as a manga series by artist Masamune Shirow. Since 1995, the series has gone through multiple film and TV anime adaptations. In 2013, an original video series appeared, followed by another TV series and, two years ago, "Ghost in the Shell: The New Movie." Along with comic books, there are also videogame versions.

But Paramount's "Ghost in the Shell," which debuts March 31 with Scarlett Johansson in the lead role of a counter-cyberterrorist, adds to the degree of difficulty by being a live-action film. The sci-fi tale, set in mid-21st century Japan, follows a cyborg called Major who just happens to be Public Security Section 9's best weapon against the world's most nefarious criminals.

Sanders and Hall met, and began collaborating, when they were in school at Saint Martins School of Art in London. Hall shot Sanders' first test commercial for Sony more than 15 years ago, and they've teamed up on multiple award-winning commercials for the likes of Guinness, Nike, and Adidas.

Hall recalls his early creative experiences in the U.K. "The whole thing with art school in England is you get your hands dirty," he says. "I was animating from early on, using an optical printer and developing my own 16mm film. We were encouraged to get to know the medium in a very hands-on way."

While "Ghost" is their first feature together, Sanders and Hall have each done significant movie work: Hall's credits include "Hot Fuzz," "The Spectacular Now," and "Transcendence." Sanders helmed the 2012 hit "Snow White and the Huntsman."

“It’s always brilliant for the creatives when the director has a long-time working relationship with the cinematographer,” notes Richard Taylor, CEO and co-founder of New Zealand’s Weta Workshop, which provided prosthetics, animatronic puppetry, and all the physical props for “Ghost.” “And in the case of Rupert and Jess, their solid understanding of each other’s work processes proved to be a great benefit to us all on this project.”

Hall, who shot the film on an Arri Alexa 65 with customized lenses in collaboration with Dan Sasaki, VP of optical engineering at Panavision, says that he and Sanders have aimed for a “tactile” focus to their work. “We have always incorporated models, miniatures, and all sorts of [physical] elements,” Hall notes. “Our approach has always been to get as much ‘in camera’ as possible” to reduce the amount of CG needed in post.

“Jess has a comfortable understanding of what it takes to put together the sort of complex imagery that Rupert requires for a VFX-heavy film such as ‘Ghost,” notes Taylor, “bringing a level of visual flair that complements the original source material.”

Hall was meticulous in his preparation for “Ghost”: Two years passed from the day he went to Hong Kong — where he snapped more than 2,000 reference pictures for the film — to the final days of photography.

“That’s a lot of visual richness and depth to draw from,” Hall explains. “The more we started working with the other heads of department in figuring out how to manufacture this world, the clearer it became that all the elements needed to be integrated — CG, miniatures, animatronics, prosthetics, lighting, set design. Everything had to intersect, and the design had to be refined and full of detail.”

For the film, special effects producer Dayton Taylor designed a full-body photogrammetry rig — an 80-camera dome system that enabled Hall and his team to capture live performance simultaneously from every

angle and then integrate these elements into their CG backgrounds. It was the first use of such a system on a major motion picture.

“It was important to us all that the retro-'80s sci-fi aesthetic of Shirow's work was evoked through every element of the picture,” says Taylor.

“This visual creative styling shines throughout every shot thanks to the decisions made by Jess.”