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Artistry Trumps Tech in Vfx Oscar Race

By DAVID S. COHEN

No awards category resonates as closely with box office returns as visual effects. The digital revolution has redefined “spectacle” in Hollywood films, and along the way vfx honorees have reflected the latest you’ve-neverseen- this-before tech advancement.

Now, though, tech breakthroughs are rarer, so artistic and creative contributions are gaining importance. This year, “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” promises to combine tech innovation—altering the age of a major movie star, Brad Pitt, for long stretches of the movie—with a central creative premise of a man who ages in reverse. If it lives up to the hype, it will be a strong awards contender.

Other pics also boast vfx that could be called artful, even beautiful. “Hellboy II” boasts imaginative creature designs on a par with last year’s “Pan’s Labyrinth.” “Iron Man” blended animatronics, practical effects and digital work, delivering breezy comic moments and not just action. “The Dark Knight” and “Hancock” added visual edge to the superhero genre. And Lionsgate’s “The Spirit” aims to bring Frank Miller’s visual flair into its digital backgrounds and virtual sets.

And don’t rule out Disney’s “Prince Caspian,” which offered up far more ambitious, consistent effects than those in the first Narnia pic, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.”

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: PRINCE CASPIAN

Distrib: Disney

Shops: Framestore, the Moving Picture Co., Weta Digital, Scanline

Vfx supervisors: Dean Wright, Wendy Rogers

Highlights: Numerous creature shots with multiple creatures in each shot, and lots of variation of each kind of creature; created environments, both digital and miniatures; tight integration of actors with CG characters; and that Rivergod sequence.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON

Distrib: Paramount

Shops: Digital Domain, Lola, Asylum, Matteworld

Team: Eric Barba

Highlights: Par is still keeping most details under wraps, but Lola will clearly bring its “digital cosmetic enhancement” skills to bear on both aging and youthening the stars; look for war scenes and plenty of period backgrounds, too.

THE DARK KNIGHT

Distrib: Warner Bros.

Shops: Double Negative, Framestore CFC, Buf, New Deal Studios (practical effects)

Team: Nick Davis, Chris Corbould, Tim Webber, Paul Franklin

Highlights: Effects created for the super-high-res Imax format; the half-live, half-CG Harvey Two-Face; many shots of the Batpod that are digital; digital ferries; Gotham City and the Hong Kong sequences.



THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL

Distrib: Fox

Shop: Weta Digital

Vfx supervisor: Jeff Okun

Highlights: A completely digital character, animated with a combination of motion capture and keyframe animation; the drone attack sequence; the aphid swarms, their destruction of Giants Stadium and their battle with the Army; plus those big spheres.

HANCOCK

Distrib: Sony

Shop: Sony Pictures Imageworks

Team: John Dykstra, John Frazier, Ken Hahn, Carey Villegas

Highlights: Extensive use of digital doubles for Will Smith and Charlize Theron; tornadoes, lightning and clouds in the Hollywood Blvd. scene; and the train-crash sequence.

HELLBOY II

Distrib: Universal

Shop: Double Negative

Team: Michael J. Wassel, Adrian De Wet, Andrew Chapman, Eamonn Butler

Highlights: Numerous creature shots; multiple characters and swarms of characters per shot; digital doubles; integration of creatures and actors; synthetic fire integrated on actors; digital environments; and the Puppet Theater sequence.

IRON MAN

Distrib: Paramount/Marvel

Shops: ILM, the Orphanage, the Embassy, Stan Winston Studio.

Team: John Nelson, Shane Mahan, Dan Sudek, Ben Snow

Highlights: Fine detail work on the suit, seen in closeups in full daylight; the flying sequence and the suit-ups; and the overall realism of the effects.

INDIANA JONES AND THE KINGDOM OF THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Distrib: Paramount

Shop: Industrial Light & Magic

Team: Pablo Helman, Steve Rawlins, Dan Sudek, Gary Powell

Highlights: Vast range of vfx, from temples to floods to UFOs; and matching the look and feel of the prior "Indy" films.

THE MUMMY: TOMB OF THE DRAGON EMPEROR

Distrib: Universal

Shops: Rhythm & Hues; Digital Domain; Illusion Arts Digital—Syd Dutton and Bill Taylor, ASC; CIS Visual Effects Group

Team: Joel Hynek, Matthew Butler, Derek Spears, Bruce Steinheimer

Highlights: The creation of the mummy emperor; digital bronze horses coming to life; the yeti; the dragon; and the digital Himalayas.



QUANTUM OF SOLACE

Distrib: Columbia

Shops: Double Negative, the Moving Picture Co., Framestore, MK 12

Team: Chris Corbould, Kevin Tod Haug

Highlights: Major in-camera special effects supplemented with CGI, including the skydiving sequence—a liveaction/ CG hybrid using “event capture”; the opening car chase; and the climactic hotel fire.

THE SPIRIT

Distrib: Lionsgate

Shops: The Orphanage, Digital Dimension, Fuel, Riot

Team: Stu Maschwitz, Aaron Rhodes, Dave Morely, David Jones

Highlights: More art than science, the all “greenscreen” show—which also used blue, gray and black screens—stressed digital cinematography and visual minimalism, showing only a few details so the viewer is drawn in.

WANTED

Distrib: Universal

Shops: Hammerhead Prods., Framestore CFC, Bazelevs

Team: Pavel Perepelkin, Dominic Tuohy, Stefen Fangmeier, Jon Farhat

Highlights: The train derailment sequence—train and gorge are digital; digital cars in action sequences as well as digital guns, blood, dust, smoke and hundreds of CG rats; digital stunt doubles; extreme-closeup high-speed photography of bullet trajectories; collisions; impacts of human heads.

IN THE MIX

“Speed Racer,” “Eagle Eye,” “Wall-E,” “The Incredible Hulk”

for more information about Carey Villegas, visit