

REVIEW

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Film's future is now

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There's new competition for actors aiming to make it big in Hollywood: Stars from the past could soon rise from the dead, thanks to computer graphics, to play in new feature films as if they had never passed away. One such resurrection can be seen in "Superman Returns," the new Bryan Singer-directed blockbuster to be released in Japan on Saturday, in which Marlon Brando returns from the grave to reprise his performance as the Man of Steel's father in the original 1978 film "Superman: The Movie," starring Christopher Reeve. Computer graphics are not only being used to reanimate the departed, however, but to also enhance the living. "X-Men: The Last Stand," set for release in Japan on Sept. 9, draws back the curtains on technology that is already transforming real actors into something like mannequins, able to be changed at a director's will. "One of the foundations of our business is confidentiality. [But] it's amazing how many touchups we do in movies and unfortunately can never talk about," says Thomas Nittman, executive producer at Lola Vfx, a California-based visual effects company that used digital rejuvenation to make Magneto (played by Ian McKellan) and Xavier (Patrick Stewart) appear 20 years younger in the opening sequence of this, the last episode of the Marvel franchise. "That's why we are so excited about 'X-Men: The Last Stand.' It wasn't a vanity thing for both McKellan and Stewart, who openly embraced the technology." There was no need for makeup to make the veteran actors appear younger. Thanks to Vfx's



REANIMATED — Archival footage and a plaster cast of Marlon Brando's face found on eBay were used to make the dead actor utter totally new lines of dialogue.

Behind Brando: Rhythm and Hues' Walt Jones

Dead movie stars like Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe and others have appeared in commercials in the past, but the effects were mainly made with compositing [pasting images from different sources] or morphing techniques [such as those used in Michael Jackson's 1991 music video "Black and White"]. Is it easier to achieve such results with actual computers and software? It hasn't reached a point where it's something that's accessible to everyone. Our work helping Brando return for the latest "Superman" film took more than a year. Software and computers are becoming more powerful every year, but ultimately these are just tools. In our case, the key to really making Marlon believable was having all of the 1977 footage available for our use. Without that, we'd likely have managed to only pull off something half as effective. Why is there this "obsession" with reviving dead movie stars? I don't honestly think it's an "obsession." Certainly, many filmmakers are starting to look keenly at the opportunity of having an unavailable actor or actress play a part in their film. The technology is quickly reaching a point where there are very few things that can't be realized on screen. This ultimately opens up a lot of doors to filmmakers, but also gives the

software, which X-Men director Brett Ratner predicts will become the most requested clause on A-list movie stars' film contracts, Lola specialists are able, with suggestions from plastic surgeons, to digitally remove wrinkles and correct sagging jowls, as well as make a star appear stronger, thinner or bustier. "We are asked to do many things plastic surgeons are asked to do and more. One time we had to remove sweat from an actor over 60 minutes of footage. We'll get asked to drive to studios or other discreet locations to view footage and give an assessment. No one wants the footage released in fear that it will show up in the tabloids." This option, which many studios and movie stars already use under nondisclosure agreements to appear sexier on screen, points to a future where all actors will most likely undergo face that will be used later in their careers to make them look younger. Superman director Singer might have employed the same technology on Brando when he decided to use the screen legend to link the first and most recent episodes of that franchise, except for one problem: The actor had died a few months before, on July 2, 2004. But Singer knew a way to revive the star of "On the Waterfront" and "The Godfather." The miracle was possible because of the expertise of Rhythm & Hues, a Los Angeles-based visual effects company, that, after a deal was signed with Brando's estate, used 2D footage from the first movie to create a brand new 3D Brando: a computer graphics clone of the actor not only able to utter never-spoken lines of dialogue, but also designed to be framed by the camera from every possible angle. Rhythm &

Hues' abilities are not exclusive. A similar result could be achieved with outstanding technology unveiled last June by Taiwan-base company FrameFree. Their FrameFree Studio is an advanced interpolation and morphing software that allows one to create virtual motion using just two photographs from different angles. This means that with just two frames of an old movie, anyone could be able to create the action between the two, making a dead movie star talk or move on screen. The magic trick of creating a three-dimensional computer graphics human actor from archive footage, gives directors unimaginable creative opportunities, such as shooting the remake of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" with Marilyn Monroe herself, or assemble impossible casts, hiring for example James Stewart and his heir, Tom Hanks, for a new movie. And it's just the last and most remarkable attempt at creating a realistic CG human, something of a Holy Grail that all major studios seek, not only to amaze moviegoers, but also to find the perfect film star of tomorrow: an actor that works for free (well, almost . . .), never refuses a request and can be manipulated and used on screen as a puppet by directors and producers. The "Brando experiment" shows that we are nearing the rainbow's end, but computer technicians and artists have been searching for that pot of gold for a long time. After the first attempt at a digital character in 1985, a CG-stained glass knight made by Industrial Light & Magic for "Young Sherlock Holmes," (it is little known that John Lasseter, the father of Pixar and "Toy Story" worked on the film), many others followed: The dinosaurs from "Jurassic Park"; Jar Jar Binks from "Star Wars — Episode I: The Phantom Menace"; the gorilla from "Mighty Joe Young." But the greatest leap forward to producing the first photo-realistic digital human beings came out of Japan in 2001, with "Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within." Taking inspiration from one of the most popular video games, a field where the Japanese already showed uncanny ability in bringing to life human characters made of pixels, Sony Pictures and Square Pictures produced what was a failure at the box office, but set what is still considered as an artistic milestone in digital cinema by every supervisors working in the visual effects field. Scientist Aki Ross, Capt. Gray Edwards and the other characters of that movie were the first digital humans ever seen



on a big screen. Even if they appeared doll-like (the challenge to give them realistic-looking hair being a key problem), when the movie was released everyone in the industry understood that sooner or later we would have realistic computer graphics performers. "Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within" also set the technical milestone for the cinema that would follow: Motion capture — a technique of digitally recording movements — was used to transfer motion from real actors to digital counterparts, and set a new standard. Since then, motion capture has become the hottest technique for movies and video games, helping in creating thousands of digital humanlike characters such as Gollum from "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy (for whom director Peter Jackson tried to convince Oscars organizers to issue Andy Serkis the first award for a digital actor). The movie industry has also begun to give its CG characters the movements of genuine actors: Tom Hanks did so for six different animated characters in "The



CHEATING TIME — California-based visual effects company Lola Vfx fed old film footage and photographs of actor Ian McKellan into their Discreet Inferno software, used warping tools to reset his face to how it looked 20 years earlier, and then referred to skin libraries to replace his skin texture.

VIRTUAL FACE LIFT — A plastic surgeon was consulted to ensure that the size and placement of actor Patrick Stewart's eyes, nose, chin, cheeks and forehead were in the correct geometric proportions during his digital rejuvenation. Everything from the jaw line, neck, and eyelids, to nose and ears was altered in some form.

Polar Express." Director Robert Zemeckis has decided to exploit the technology for his next two movies: the first, "Monster House," produced by Zemeckis, is a 3D cartoon about three kids fighting against a maniac mansion, which will be released in Japan next January; the second is "Beowulf," set for 2007, which is a 3D movie inspired by the ancient English poem of the same name and tells the story of a warrior fighting with a monster as it terrorizes towns. Instead of shooting "Beowulf" as a live-action movie, Zemeckis asked his team of actors — including Angelina Jolie, John Malkovich and Anthony Hopkins — to wear suits of reflective white dots in order to capture their actions and facial expressions: The result will be an animated movie that will look like a live action film, with CG replicas of real performers. The ability for movie studios to do away with all real actors altogether is nearer than ever, but some people in the business say that taking that step is anything but certain.

"There's a lot of talk about having 100 percent CG actors perform in movies, but we don't think that's very feasible and won't happen for a long time" says Vfx's Nittman, citing prohibitive costs. Rhythm and Hues' Walt Jones goes further, arguing that audiences will quickly tire of the whole replacement of flesh and blood with pixels. "Like any of the *effect du jours*, it will probably reach a point where audiences become oversaturated and are unable to feel an empathetic connection to an image that is, for obvious reasons, completely synthetic." What is certain, however, is that audiences have lost the ability to distinguish the real from the unreal, and the way the way movies are made has changed forever. While Sean Connery bowed out as James Bond to make way for a younger man, Harrison Ford is right now making yet another "Indiana Jones" adventure at the age of 64. It is possible that he — or whoever owns his image — will continue making them long after he is gone.

Ageless X-men: Lola Vfx's Thomas Nittman

When and where did the idea of digital rejuvenation came from? Cosmetic enhancements in music videos is very common and accepted. In 2004, Greg/Colin Strause, Edson Williams, and myself formed Lola Visual Effects and started demonstrating our cosmetic enhancement techniques to all feature film studios. Most of the films we work on cannot be discussed. We make actors look thinner, younger, more muscular, more beautiful, and remove blemishes and imperfections. **How did you work with the actors?** We make some general guidelines and recommendations, but they are not required: For example, hair is something that can be relatively easily done by the makeup department. For "X-Men: The Last Stand," there was zero intervention on set. Facial cyber-scans were already scheduled for both Ian and Patrick. However, Lola VFX often completes most of the age reduction without the use of the cyber-scans and uses them only as a fail safe or reference. **What is the role of the plastic surgeons in the process?** In earlier work performed on other movies, we made changes to test shots on actors that completely made them look genderless or androgynous. No one

could figure out what happened, but it just looked wrong. Everyone had an idea of what to change, but most of the time we would spin our wheels for weeks trying to make an actor look correct. That's when we decided to consult with plastic surgeons. Simple fixes recommended by the surgeon would immediately make our work look great again. We typically prepare multiple versions of each shot taking into account the studio's, supervisor's and director's feedback and also provide additional versions with the plastic surgeon's feedback. The plastic surgeon's version is typically selected by everyone involved. **In the rejuvenation process, what is the most critical aspect? What is the most difficult thing to correct?** We can make a 70-year-old look 50 and, perhaps, even push it to maybe 45 years old. Once we have to start dealing with age reductions greater than 30-35 years we are pushing the current limits of the technology. That's not to say we aren't working on new processes and concepts to make that happen, but it would be difficult to do a complete movie. We are trying to bridge the gap between CG actors and the technology we have today. We can protect the brand [the actor] that the studios and agents have invested vast amounts of money in, for example

by reducing the actors age. We can let them make another sequel that before may not have been possible. We have talked about age reduction, but very often we are asked to make actors look older. Younger is definitely less difficult, but we have been and continue to develop our digital aging process as well. **Where will use of this technology go from here?** We are considering establishing a service for actors where we capture (digitally, film, and cyberscan) them on a yearly basis and archive the footage for future use. For example, if we were able to capture the attributes of a young starlet now, we would be able to use the assets for future films. We would be able to mathematically calculate the exact geometric proportions of their face and body and map it on to their older frame on a film 30 years later. **What did the actors think about this effect? Do you think that this could substitute for real plastic surgery or makeup in the future?** Real plastic surgery can be dangerous, and the outcomes aren't always what you expect. By digitally enhancing actors, if they don't like it, we change it. We can make thousands of changes digitally. You can't do that with real plastic surgery. (M.C.)