





NOTHING LOST

IT HAS A NEW PLOT AND AN AMERICAN A-LIST STAR. BUT, SAY THE MAKERS OF BIG-BUDGET ANIME ADAPTATION *GHOST IN THE SHELL*, THE CYBERPUNK SPIRIT IS STILL ALIVE

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS

IN TRANS LATION



As eerie music swells, a figure takes shape on the giant screen. Identifiably female, it rises from a pool of fluid, its ivory-white outer layer detaching and flying from it in paper-like shreds. LED lights twinkle on either side of the screen; the monitor glitches. And as the soundtrack builds to a crescendo, the figure completes its metamorphosis. It's Scarlett Johansson.

Hollywood has for some time been on a quest to crack anime. With intricate mythologies and devoted armies of fans, the medium has obvious appeal for movie producers. But adapting it is no easy task. James Wong's *Dragonball: Evolution* (2009) is a cautionary tale, grossing \$57 million from a \$30 million budget but drawing scorn from critics. Even the biggest names in moviemaking have struggled. An adaptation of 1988's landmark sci-fi anime *Akira* remains unmade, despite 15 years' worth of attempts (see page 77). James Cameron puzzled over his spin on *Battle Angel Alita* for over a decade, before passing it on to Robert Rodriguez (production recently wrapped at Austin's Troublemaker Studios). Shane Black toyed with *Death Note*, before ultimately departing to make a new *Predator*.

All of which means *Ghost In The Shell* is the first mega-budget anime adaptation to arrive in cinemas. The tenacious director who made it happen is not the big name you might expect, but Rupert Sanders, best known for 2012's *Snow White & The Huntsman*.

Empire sits down with Sanders in November 2016 at Tokyo's Tabloid gallery, a swish space in the Creator's District. Tonight is Paramount's launch event for the film, hence the showreel being shown to press, accompanied by live score from composer Kenji Kawai and mini-orchestra. The event is slick and high-energy, but Sanders himself is clearly tired. "It's been a difficult journey," he admits. "But sometimes the best ones are."

It was actually Steven Spielberg who hand-picked him, after seeing the director's 2009 advert for video game *Halo 3: ODST*, and having already commissioned several screenwriters to wrestle with the source material. "My immediate instinct was to

pitch a closer version to the anime than I think they had imagined," Sanders recalls. "The first thing I did when Steven approached me was collage together a pitch using everything I loved from the franchise. Like a DJ looking for breaks!"

Anyone familiar with *Ghost In The Shell* will understand that it's a tough carapace to crack as a mainstream blockbuster. Originally a manga by Masamune Shirow (serialised in Kodansha's *Young Magazine* between 1989 and 1997), it has been spun off into various animated TV series and movies, with such excellent monikers as *Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex — Solid State Society* (2006) and 2015's *Ghost In The Shell: The New Movie*. But the instalment that gained the property international recognition was Mamoru Oshii's acclaimed 1995 film. Its disciples include many prominent sci-fi filmmakers, including James Cameron, who called it "the first truly adult animation film to reach a level of literary and visual excellence", and the Wachowskis, who have been cheerfully honest about plundering parts of it for *The Matrix*.

Put as simply as possible, it's the tale of cyber cops working for Section 9, on the trail of a hacker known as the Puppet Master, who turns out to be no human terrorist but a rogue artificial intelligence. But beneath the familiar manga tropes are embedded deep philosophical themes. The titular "shell" refers to the artificial bodies that populate the tale: most of the franchise's human characters sport cyborg enhancements. The "ghost", meanwhile, refers to the soul, or consciousness within that frame: the intangible, incorporeal spark that makes us unique. If we're replacing our bodies wholesale, the series asks, what keeps us human?

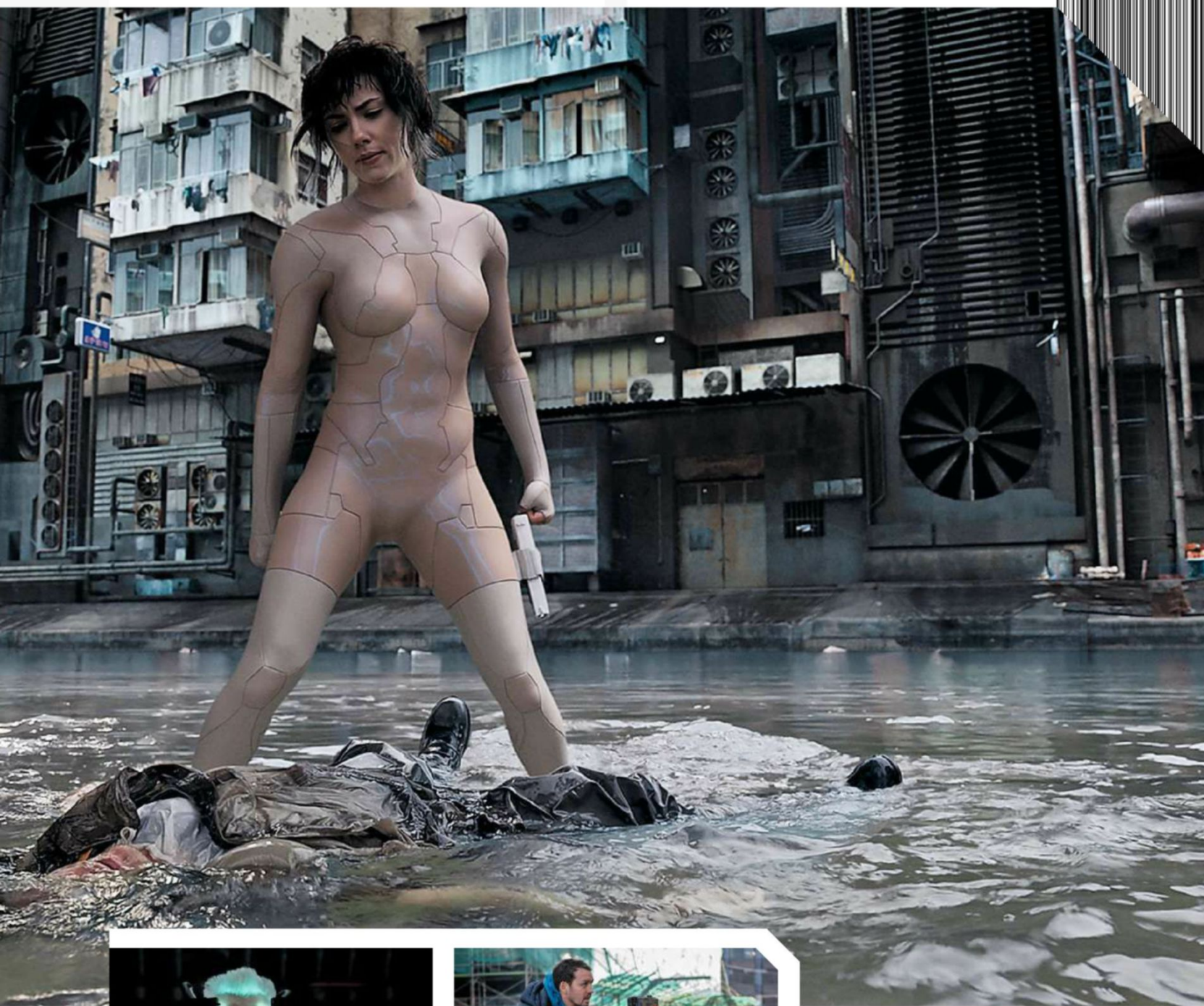
Personifying that dilemma in the new version is Johansson's heroine: apparently no longer named Motoko Kusanagi, but instead referred to simply as 'the Major'. There have been many iterations of this character over the years. Sanders' take is that she's the first-ever entirely artificial human: a completely cyborg body and brain, inhabited by the consciousness of the human she once was.

"It's a woman who's basically trying to ask the question of, first, 'What am I?' and then later, 'Who was I?'" says the director. "In a weird way, it's a story about adolescence."

SIX MONTHS BEFORE Tokyo, *Empire* is on set at Stone Street Studios in Wellington, New Zealand. Outside, a large circular plaza has been constructed, based specifically on Cityplaza in Taikoo Shing, Hong Kong (a detail sometimes missed, dating back to Oshii's anime film, is that *Ghost In The Shell* is not explicitly set in Japan, but in a nebulous pan-Asian megalopolis inspired by Hong Kong). An ancient-looking wooden pagoda with a gnarly tree growing out of it sits incongruously beside a high concrete walkway. The walls are riddled with bullet holes, the streets littered with rubble and burned-out cars. As the light fades towards evening, a crew scatters yet more pulverised masonry, and we watch a diminutive female figure taking a severe beating from one of the franchise's instantly recognisable spider-like tanks. The tank itself will be CG, but there's an impressive full-sized representation



Main: Scarlett Johansson dons her flesh-coloured camouflage suit as the Major engages in soggy combat with a hacker. **Clockwise from top left:** Pilou Asbæk as Section 9's Batou; Director Rupert Sanders; The Major's cyber core revealed; Beware the robot geisha.



in situ for the Major to butt heads with. It's only when she turns to face us that we realise we're not watching Johansson, but her stunt double, Carly Rees.

We catch up with Johansson herself when we get back inside the studio. Wrapped in a black hoodie, her black hair streaked with electric blue, she looks tired: drained both from the physical action (Rees isn't doing *all* the heavy lifting) and the cerebral exertion of tracking her character's quest for identity.

"She's living a unique experience," the star explains, deep in philosophical mode, "as somebody who has an idea of who she thinks she was, and then who she is now, and the person that she *feels* she is, this sort of gnawing

feeling she has in her ghost. Being able to play those three sides: the ego, the super-ego and the id... That was pretty enticing.”

While Rees was scrapping with the tank, Johansson has been otherwise engaged on another set: a dark interior “lair” for the film’s nominal villain Kuze, played by Michael Pitt. The scene itself is kept secret from *Empire*’s prying eyes — Johansson hints that it is “a tactical approach to a target the Major’s been hunting” — but we do catch a glimpse of thick black cables trailing from a central hub to a bank of tall computers. Apparently they can be attached to people for “information harvest”.

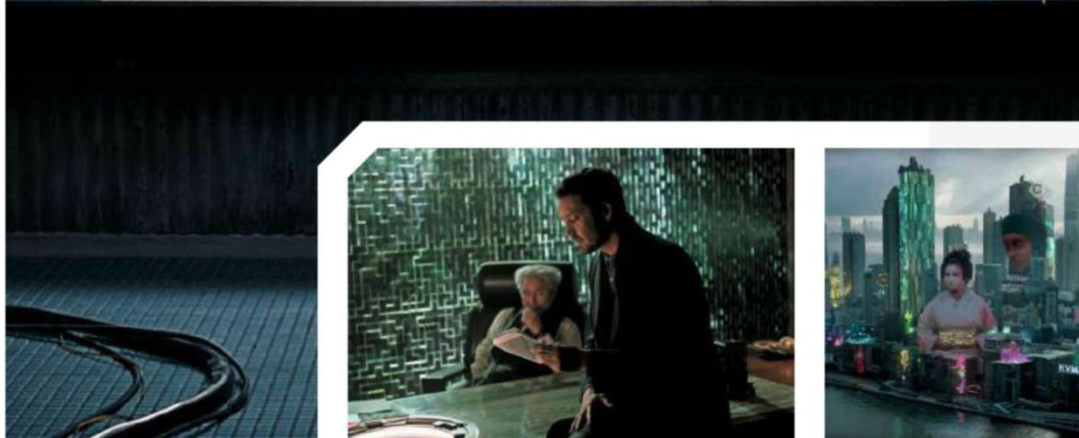
The plaza and tank tell us specific scenes from Oshii’s film are being faithfully recreated, but the presence of Kuze reveals that changes are being made. Kuze doesn’t come from Oshii or Shirow, but from the second season of *Stand Alone Complex*, a TV series overseen by Kenji Kamiyama. There, the messianic hacker revolutionary wants to force human evolution by breaking everyone free of their corporeal bodies and taking their consciousness into cyberspace. In the live-action *Ghost In The Shell*, however, Kuze’s mission is to bring down Hanka Robotics, the company that created the Major. The film begins with a tea house-set assassination (by robot geishas, no less) and an audacious case of data-hacking, putting Section 9 on the case of who took it and why.

It is, in essence, a mash-up of *Ghost In The Shell*’s various stories and continuities — a new story with familiar set-pieces. It seems a necessary approach to an original anime that would basically be unfilmable as a Hollywood blockbuster action-sci-fi. There’s something uniquely dreamlike about Oshii’s film, its somnambulant pacing allowing for sequences like the wordless five minutes where a character goes home and feeds his basset hound.

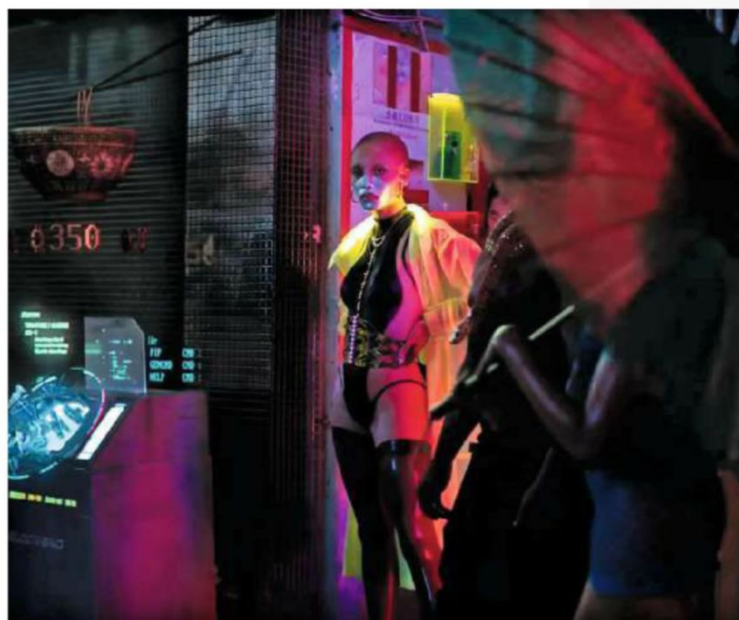
“Oshii was clear that we could use what we wanted but make it our own,” says Sanders. “So our driving story is a suspenseful, action-driven character discovery, and around that is the thematic stuff, which I hope comes across. It can’t be that the introspection and philosophy of the first anime propels you forward, with the action secondary to that. We had to do it the other way round.”

Other repurposed set-pieces from the Oshii original — already glimpsed in the first trailer — include the Major’s iconic backwards swan dive from a high building and confrontation in ankle-deep water with a fleeing hacker. Apparently naked in both, Johansson is actually sporting a flesh-toned silicone camouflage suit. “I don’t wear that too often, thankfully,” she grins sheepishly. “It’s hot where you don’t want it to be and cold where you don’t want it to be.”

Empire doesn’t see her in it on set, but there are startling nude representations of her all over the Weta design departments, including a nylon-and-steel mannequin intricately constructed for the shelling sequence from more than 200 3D-printed components. Sanders jokes that when production’s finished he’s taking it home.



Clockwise from above: The Major, though fully cyborg, is troubled by a “gnawing feeling”; The colourful skyline of the pan-Asian megalopolis; What secrets lurk in its neon-lit nightspots?; Sanders with Japanese legend Takeshi Kitano on set.





THE BATTLE FOR AKIRA

THE LIVE-ACTION ADAPTATION OF '80S ANIME FILM *AKIRA* IS STILL STUCK IN DEVELOPMENT HELL

2002

Warner Bros. acquires the rights for a live-action adaptation of *Akira* (1988), about a dystopian Tokyo in the year 2019.

2003

Stephen Norrington (*The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) is attached to direct, from a screenplay by James Robinson.

2007

Irish first-time director and animator Ruairi Robinson replaces Norrington.

2008

Warner Bros. announces that its *Akira* will be two films, each adapting three

volumes of Katsuhiro Otomo's manga. Gary Whitta writes new screenplays, taking place in a Japanese-owned Manhattan. Leonardo DiCaprio's Appian Way production company gets involved.

2009

Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby take a crack at the screenplay.

2010

Albert Hughes is brought on to replace Ruairi Robinson. Rumoured casting includes Zac Efron and Morgan Freeman.

EARLY 2011

Steve Kloves is brought in to write yet

another draft. Andrew Garfield, Robert Pattinson, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, James Franco and James McAvoy are all said to be on the studio's casting radar. Keanu Reeves gets close, but ultimately declines. Rumours surface of a deal with Universal to share the sizeable budget, but it falls through. Early pre-production is shut down and staff are let go.

LATE 2011

Jaume Collet-Serra is the latest director. Garrett Hedlund, Gary Oldman, Helena Bonham Carter, Kristen Stewart, Keira Knightley and Ken Watanabe are reportedly approached for roles.

2012

Production offices are closed again.

2015

Marco Ramirez starts a new screenplay from scratch. Warner Bros. is apparently now thinking in terms of a trilogy. Christopher Nolan's name is mentioned.

2016

Warner Bros. is rumoured to be discussing the project with Justin Lin, but nothing more is heard.


AS SANDERS TELLS it, Johansson's casting was the moment when "there was finally a real motor behind the film". But it has proved somewhat controversial. Last April, *Marvel's Agents Of S.H.I.E.L.D.* star Ming-Na Wen tweeted, "Nothing against Scarlett Johansson. In fact, I'm a big fan. But everything against this Whitewashing of Asian role". The same month, comic-book writer Jon Tsuei complained, "It is inherently a Japanese story, not a universal one." There have surely been no gripes, however, about *Ghost In The Shell*'s eclectic supporting cast, an impressive assortment of talent from around the globe.

The members of Section 9 include Pilou Asbaek (Danish), Lasarus Ratuere (Australian), Tawanda Manyimo (Zimbabwean), Yutaka Izumihara (Japanese), Danusia Samal (British, via Turkey and Yemen), and Chin Han (Singaporean). On the edges of the core team are Juliette Binoche (French) as Dr Ouelet, a Hanka scientist ("almost the Major's mother, in a way" according to Sanders). And, in a casting coup, the legendary Japanese polymath Takeshi Kitano plays Aramaki, the head of the unit: it's his first full feature outside Japan since 2000's *Brother*. Bristolian trip-hopper Tricky has also taken his first film acting role since *The Fifth Element* as a cyber-monk, cable-connected to his brotherhood and a step on the Major's spiritual path.

It's a heady mix of cultures and aesthetics, and if a multi-ethnic cast undeniably swaps out further characters who could have been Japanese (although the Major, canonically in some parts of the anime, has actually chosen a European-looking shell), it's at least deliberately intended as a forward-looking proto-utopia: a melting-pot city of the future where national identities go barely noticed. The English-language film will see Kitano retaining his native Japanese language, but it's a detail that goes unremarked within the movie's world. "I just can't really speak English," Kitano shrugs, typically deadpan. "I can't memorise dialogue either. I got Scarlett to hold up my cue cards."

Unveiling the first glimpse of the movie on the home turf of Tokyo is part of the strategy to placate online mutterers, and Sanders is unrepentant as he explains his vision. "We're not taking this beloved, cherished property and stamping all over it," he insists. "We're not steamrolling anything that was great about it. I think we've got a very fresh take on futurism that people haven't seen before. Hopefully the sounds of *Ghost In The Shell* resonate around the world and come back to Japan."

One thing is for sure: Hollywood is watching with interest, calculating which anime could be next for adaptation if this is a success. *Alita: Battle Angel* and *Death Note* are on their way. Maybe one day we'll get a big-budget, English-language *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, or an *Appleseed*, or maybe even a *Bubblegum Crisis Tokyo 2040*. Who knows, *Akira* might even finally see the light of day.

For now, the focus is on the present and Sanders' reborn cyborg. The shell has changed; hopefully the ghost remains intact. 

GHOST IN THE SHELL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 MARCH