CLOSE UP

LEVI'S 'TRAIN' AD SPOT

Director Johan Renck and The Mill's Ben Smith discuss the creation of the first commercial ever to feature the work of legendary artist H R Giger – Levi's 'Train' ad BY MARK RAMSHAW

ON THE CD
Full-sized screengrabs

DETAILS

TITLE
Train

PRODUCTION COMPANY
HSI Productions for BBH NY

DIRECTOR
Johan Renck

RUNNING TIME
60 seconds

FIRST BROADCAST
14 July 2003

EFFECTS HOUSE
The Mill

URL
www.mill.co.uk
www.BaranyArtists.com
http://hrgiger.com

TEAM SIZE ON PROJECT
Four (for the 3D)

TIME TAKEN TO COMPLETE PROJECT
Six weeks (for 3D)

SOFTWARE USED
SoftimageIXSI, Maya, flame

Though the artist H R Giger is best known for creature-based work, his passion for the industrial encompasses a lifelong fascination with trains. Having built his own ghost train as a boy, he went on to design locomotives for two notable, though unrealised, film projects: Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Dune*, and Ridley Scott's *Train*, as well as constructing a scale model 'Nightmare Train' for *Species*. This has led to his first ad assignment, working with acclaimed director Johan Renck and The Mill to create an otherworldly CG train for a Levi's ad.

Although Giger has always been reluctant to commercialise his work, the combination of the Levi's name and a personal letter sent by Renck convinced him to make the leap, and he agreed to design a train, saddle and tunnel entrance – although the latter was never fully realised due to budgetary constaints.

"I'm a big fan of Giger, and given his earlier work thought the train idea was something he might like," explains Renck. "We had really good communication right from the start."

THE LEAST PHALLIC TRAIN EVER DESIGNED

Although Renck made his pitch to the ad agency prior to contacting Giger, he had always had the artist's work in mind. The brief was to create a train that looked futuristic, but to avoid any overly familiar elements, such as skulls. Accordingly, Giger reined in some of his signature imagery, including any overly phallic design touches – so much so that after the initial presentation to Levi's, some perceived that the front of the train looked too much like a vagina! "It's not easy to be an artist of Giger's calibre and get thrown into the ad business," says Renck. "But he's very good to work with, keen to get it right, and he understands the process."

For the live shoot in Trona, California, a model train was built for reference. Giger also worked with an assistant, Andras Halasz, on a couple of CG images. But for full CG work, the director was reunited with London effects house The Mill. Visual Effects Supervisor Hitesh Patel attended the shoot, advising, taking land survey data and environment stills, then returning to the UK for work on the train. Animator Ben Smith handled the vehicle modelling and texturing.

"As we began working with more detailed designs, Johan would pick and choose elements from six different ones," explains Smith. "Because there wasn't one single design to work from, the modelling process was fairly interactive. We went off in a few directions before the right one was found."

"We'd have a continuous dialogue as Giger's drawings were translated into digital form," adds Renck. "I wanted to make sure we had the Giger brand on the whole thing."

HORSEPLAY

Beyond the train, the other CG elements included the tunnel entrance, the mountain and digital replacements for the horse's legs in shots in which a woman on horseback leaps over the train. "Because of the way the live footage was slowed down, the real legs didn't look quite right, so we came up with something a little more interesting," says Smith. While he created the train in *XSI*, fellow modeller Robert Kolbeins worked on other elements using *Maya* – a personal rather than technical decision. "We tend to do it quite a lot," says Smith. "With our pipeline it all gets textured in *XSI* and output through *mental ray* in the end anyway."

Renck had specific thoughts on the how the surface of the train should appear. The idea was that the train had been powering along on its journey for decades, so a suitably battered and worn look was needed to contrast with its futuristic form. "It ended up being very complicated, multi-layered work, and took about three weeks to texture the whole train," says Smith. "But it was a really cool job for me. Everyone here respects Giger, and personally I really like his work, so working from his train designs was good fun."

The commercial marks the first fully faithful translation of Giger's work into 3D, and the artist is now keen to collaborate on further ads. Renck says: "It would be my dream to work with him again on another project, but one not subject to other people's opinions or censorship. Though the lack of freedom with ads sometimes enhances creativity, what I'd really like to do is tap into Giger's mind, to come up with something less well polished, less well behaved." ■

FURTHER VIEWING

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'Train' premiered in the US in July, but was pulled a few weeks later after complaints from a train safety lobby. According to Johan Renck, it may yet resurface in cinemas

FREEZE FRAME

A rail track cuts a line right across a desert landscape, disappearing into a tunnel in front of a mountain. Soon, it's clear that the vehicle powering along the track is no ordinary locomotive. A woman wearing Levi's jeans, and on horseback, is also on the track, thundering along on a collision course with the otherworldly train. Just before impact, the horse leaps into the air, miraculously clearing every carriage, before landing safely and continuing its journey...

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HARSH LIGHT OF DAY

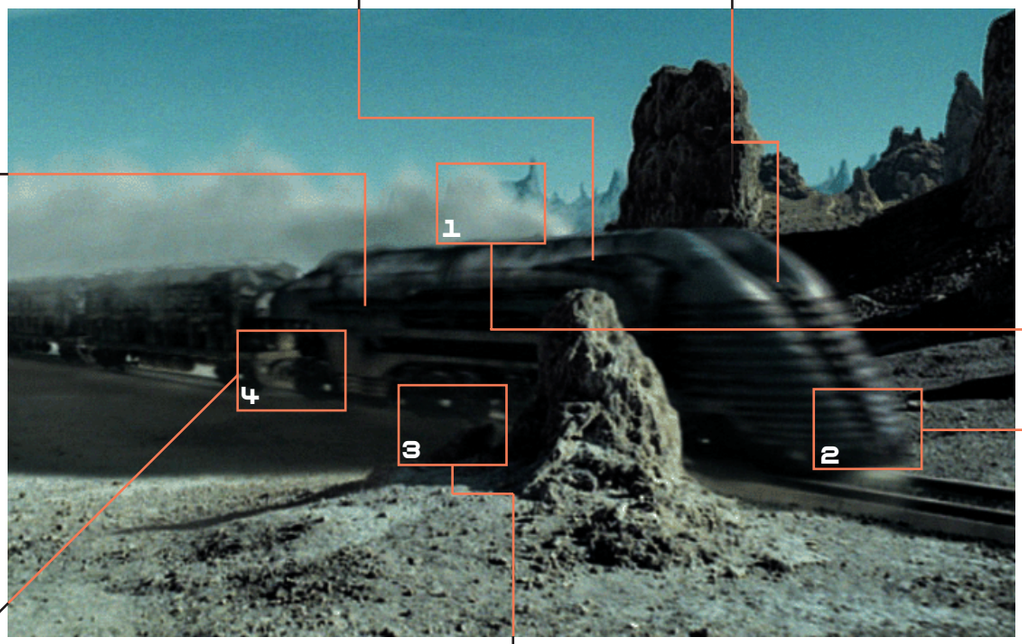
"We used a mixture of traditional lighting and HDRI, giving the Final Gathering 50 per cent influence over the whole ambience," explains The Mill's Ben Smith. "It's a desert environment with very bright and strong directional lighting, so the look is a very black and white one."

METAL WORK

Texturing gives the otherwise sleek train a scarred look. Ben Smith spent three weeks developing textures. "I went to [London's] King's Cross area, down to the canal, shooting tarnished, paint-peeled metal, and used that both for inspiration and as digital source material."

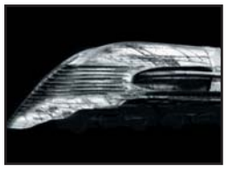
SURFACE EFFECTS

Surface reflections were made less distinct along the top and bottom of the train, to simulate the effect of dirt and dust. "Hitesh [Patel, VFX Supervisor] shot still plates on set, which were stitched into a 360-degree image. We used that for the map and the basis of the lighting."



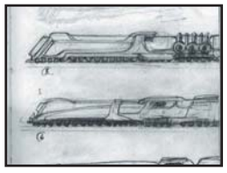
1 MILITARY PRECISION

"The smoke and dust were generated by Flow Analysis Inc, a company that uses a virtual wind tunnel for military applications," says Smith. "We gave them a more basic model of our train, and their simulation spat out a voxel file. This provided all the information for the smoke curling around the wheel arches and across the top of the train, and was used to drive a custom smoke shader for *mental ray*."



2 DIGITAL DETAIL

Giger also worked with an assistant, Andras Halasz, to produce this digital train image. Here, many of the details used in the final design are visible, including the spine-like detailing at the nose, and the sloping shell across the top section of the carriage.



4 DESIGN EVOLUTION

An early sketch from H R Giger shows how the final design evolved from a few permutations. Unlike his achingly precise painting and sculpture work, Giger firmed up ideas simply by sketching, erasing, and refining.

3 WHEELS IN MOTION

The Sub-D train model and wheel mechanics, prior to lighting and texturing. "All the wheels move correctly," says Smith. "They vibrate authentically. The brake buffers even move. It's all expression-driven."