



SUPER
NATURE

fashion is evolving

Darren Aronofsky
Shane Meadows
Christopher Guest

Raf Simons
LCD Soundsystem
The Black Lips
Gilbert & George

Mark Titchner vs
Napalm Death

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Reality show: THE FOUNTAIN



Star here: Jackman and Weisz romance against the Parks' stellar backdrop

Standard computer-generated effects weren't good enough for Darren Aronofsky's vision for *The Fountain*, so he turned to Oxfordshire father-and-son team Peter and Chris Parks instead

Darren Aronofsky earned himself a reputation for unorthodox thinking after his debut, *Pi*, and cemented his association with virtuoso image-making after *Requiem For A Dream*, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect his new film to push on both fronts. But *The Fountain* – a tale of eternal life featuring grand New World battle sequences and gaping sci-fi spacescapes – was almost dealt a mortal blow in 2002 when Brad Pitt quit. Aronofsky downgraded the budget from \$70million to \$35million, but truly had to think outside the box to keep his FX sequences suitably awe-inducing, with expectations still running high.

So he went to the village of Poffley End, in Oxfordshire, where – in small containers of fluids underneath pioneering cameras that exist solely in this 400-year-old cowshed – his visions of eternity were custom-made. Chris Parks, responsible with his father Peter for the incredible work, explains: "They were trying to do something different, but didn't know quite what, because it had never been done before." He's mostly talking about the amazing final sequence, in which Hugh Jackman's 25th-century astronaut ascends to his *2001*-style omega-point in a beautiful, shimmering golden nebula. "[The Parks] were saviours, because

I wouldn't have been nearly as happy with the visual effects if we'd taken the normal route. We don't know what goes on in space, so I've always been pushing it towards the abstract," Aronofsky says.

It was done using micro-photography of fluids subjected to different conditions (under magnification, a dash of dye can look like colossal billowing clouds) on the huge "optical benches" Peter started building in 1961 to photograph plankton. They look like insane homemade time machines, but are essentially giant camera rigs that allow pair to focus on things right down to microscopic levels. "We've had chick embryos inside their shells, with red-blood cells pumping around, filling 120ft screens," remarks Chris.

Peter first turned his scientific work to cinematic ends in sequences for Richard Donner's *Superman* and has won an Oscar for his continuing film work. But with the machine-lathed-consistency of computer-generated effects now the norm, the Parks team still holds one card. "[Computer technicians] can create particle streams for effects like water and fire, but it's the mistakes they can't produce. Everything that's in there, they have to specify. Whereas we can produce these streams and it has a random and chaotic nature to it, which is what makes it look real," says Chris.

It's inappropriate to call it lo-fi, because of the expertise involved, but there is definitely something endearingly homegrown about this dabbling-in-the-potting shed (and the costs – a mere \$140,000 – reflect that). Both Parks are extraordinarily enthusiastic: though Chris downplays their work, using the engineers' mantra – "problem-solving" – to summarise their many projects, it's clear that there is a fervour that has been passed down and which runs through all their various work: from Hollywood, to commercials, to *Umberij*, the evolution-inspired fantasy series Peter has been writing and Chris' exhibition photography.

There's such a crystalline focus to the images they produce, and to the urge to improve their equipment, get in closer, see ever more clearly. Chris doesn't think it's a religious so much as a "spiritual" drive, but admits they exist on some kind of boundary where scientific curiosity becomes something greater. Maybe, he admits, you can boil it down to a particular feeling: "It's nice to show people something they haven't seen before. Wonder is a great thing – kids have it, but adults tend not to have it to the same degree, or not allow themselves to." PHIL HOAD

The Fountain is out now
www.imogeequest3d.com