

SHAPING THE FUTURE

WORDS TOM ELLEN

WITH HIS SCI-FI THRILLER *THE CREATOR*, DIRECTOR GARETH EDWARDS IMAGINES AN AI-RAVAGED EARTH. HE TALKS US THROUGH THE GLOBE-TROTTING CONSTRUCTION OF A BOLD NEW WORLD

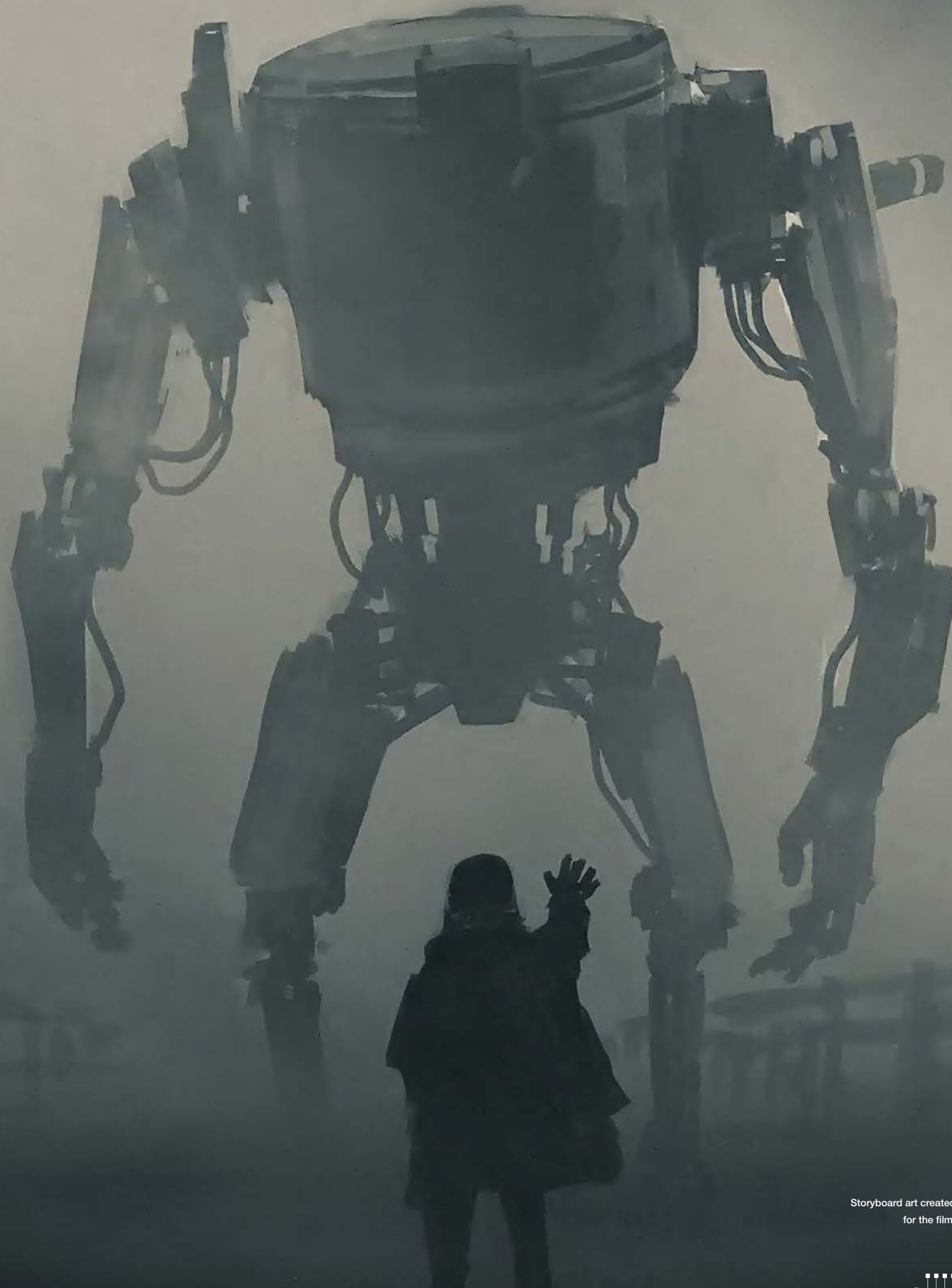
It was deep in the cornfields of Iowa that the idea took hold. Gareth Edwards had just finished work on his last movie — 2016's *Star Wars* standalone *Rogue One* — and the British filmmaker was driving across the US with his girlfriend, ostensibly for some downtime. "You can't help thinking, though, 'I wonder what I'll do next?'" Edwards recalls. "As we drove through these beautiful, tall grass fields, I saw this strange facility with a Japanese logo on it. I suddenly thought, 'What if there were robots in there? What if they'd never left that factory and they came out into this field — what would they make of the world?'"

Seven years later, the seed of that casual road-trip musing has blossomed into *The Creator*, a thriller about humans fighting for survival against AI. Set in 2070, 15 years after robotic 'simulants' have sparked a war with humans by detonating a nuclear bomb on Los Angeles, the film tracks Special Forces operative Joshua (John David Washington) in his attempt

to destroy an AI 'superweapon', only to discover said weapon is a child (newcomer Madeleine Yuna Voyles).

Following *Rogue One* — and before that, 2014's *Godzilla* — *The Creator* also represents Edwards' first foray back into crafting his own, original science-fiction universe since his masterful low-budget debut, *Monsters*, in 2010. So, after a long stint working within existing studio properties, was it exciting to be back building a world from scratch again? "Yeah, the positives are that you can do anything you want," he tells *Empire*. "You have this infinite blank canvas." And the negatives? He gives a wry smile: "You can do anything you want. You have this infinite blank canvas..."

Colouring that canvas in would take Edwards on a 10,000-mile trip to 80 locations in eight different countries, from Iowa to the Himalayas, via jungles, Buddhist temples and particle accelerators. It was, the director laughs, "a lot". Here, he talks us through the wild, globe-spanning adventure that was creating *The Creator*.



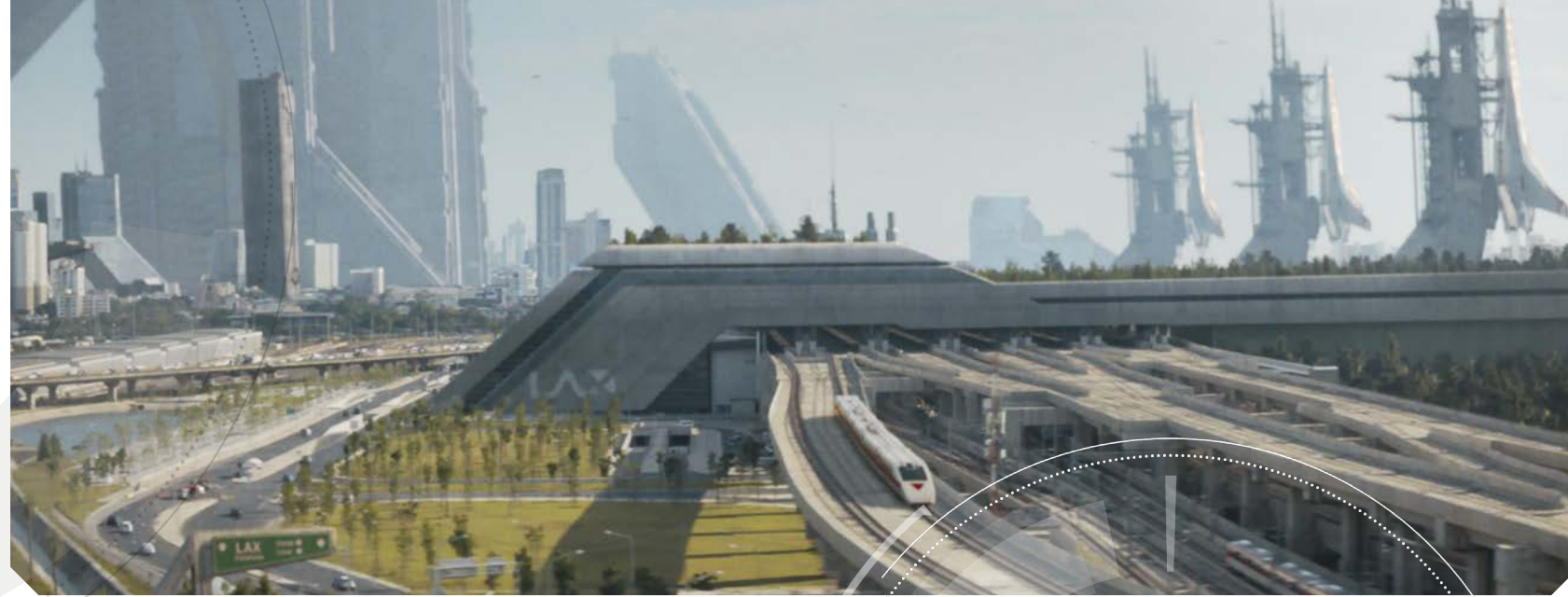
Storyboard art created for the film.

THE WORLD

After that initial light-bulb moment in the Iowan countryside, Edwards embarked on the same process he has used for all his films: the compilation of a visual 'ideas Bible' from which to draw inspiration. "The first thing I do is start collecting imagery," he says. "Movie stills, travel photography — it all goes into a folder, and that becomes the thing I go back to whenever I get stuck."

In *The Creator's* not-too-distant future, advancements in AI have split Planet Earth into two distinct territories: New Asia — a borderless melting pot in the east, where robots are generally regarded as equals to humans — and the West, led by America, which is intent on crushing robo-evolution at all costs. Straddling that divide is the eponymous 'Creator' — the human responsible for devising super-advanced AI in the first place. "No-one knows who this person is," Edwards explains. "They're the Oppenheimer of AI and there's been this big manhunt for them for years. On one side of the world, they're an Osama Bin Laden figure — public enemy number one. On the other [New Asia], they're a god, a messiah, and people will fight to the death to defend them."

Much of this fighting to the death takes place in the cities and farmlands of New Asia, and the area's sweeping landscapes of paddy fields nestled among towering dystopian hangars make for some of the film's most ambitious visuals. "When it comes to world-building, the best thing is often to merge two existing things," Edwards says. "Bring together two grand visuals that can have sex and give birth to something new. I'm like a truffle pig — I spend all my time trying to sniff those visuals out." For New Asia, Edwards happened upon two particularly delectable truffles: "What if someone made *Apocalypse Now* in the *Blade Runner* universe?" he grins. "That idea of imagery normally associated with Vietnam War films having this sci-fi skew to it was so exciting to me."



It was made even more exciting by the technique with which it was realised. While most sci-fi blockbusters, Edwards notes, will "spend a fortune on concept art, and design things to death", *The Creator* did its world-building in the *real world*. Eschewing the idea of expensive sets and acres of green-screen, the director used initial development money to go location-scouting in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. "I would film the landscapes, or little moments like a Buddhist monk praying. Then, with ILM, we turned that footage into a 'visual pitch' for the studio, dropping [futuristic] buildings into the background, or turning the monk into a robot. It gave it this realism — everything in the frame was *real*, aside from a few elements." Happily, the studio — New Regency — was sold on this method of reverse engineering. "My plan was to work backwards," Edwards says. "Shoot as if this was a contemporary film about a contemporary war, in real locations — and layer the sci-fi in later."

With New Asia's aesthetic settled upon — and Thailand selected as the site for principal photography — it was time to start thinking about the territory's inhabitants. Both human and not-so-human.

THE ROBOTS

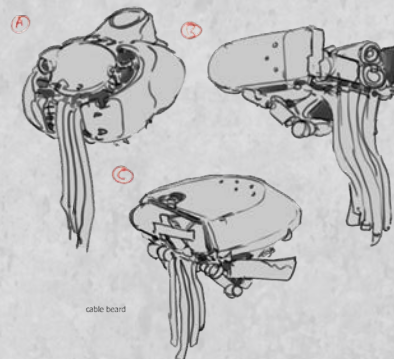
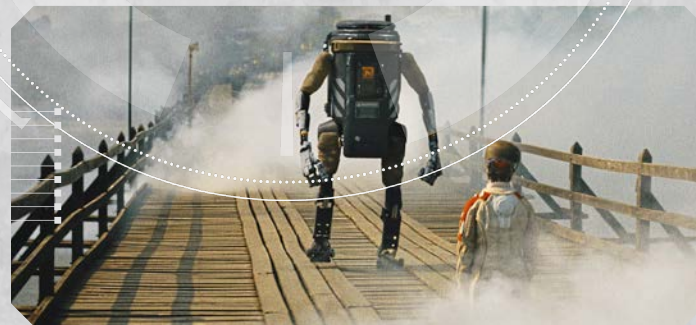
Edwards refers to it as a "dun-dun-DUN!" moment: that hoary old sci-fi cliché when a seemingly human character is revealed to have been — wait for it — *an android all along!* "I wanted to take that off the table," he says of *The Creator's* robotic population. "In this film, it's visually very clear who is AI and who isn't. Even with the more humanoid ones."

In the world of *The Creator*, robots come in all shapes and sizes. "I wanted something like that classic 'from-ape-to-man' silhouette," Edwards tells us. "So, you can see the evolution of the robots, from early, boxy, Sony Walkman-like ones, all the way up to the more visually sophisticated ones with human faces, which are called 'simulants'. But they're all as intelligent as each other, and treat each other equally."

The design of the 'simulants', with their circular hole through an otherwise human head, was the result of a happy accident on one of those scouting trips. "I was filming this farmer in a paddy field," Edwards remembers. "He was looking at me, like, 'Why are you filming me?' And then he turned to smoke a cigarette. In post-[production], ILM punched a hole through his ears, so that when he was staring directly at us he looked human, but when he turned to smoke, you could see straight through the side of his head. It was the most engaging, fascinating shot."

One 'simulant' we get to know particularly well is freedom fighter Harun (played by Ken Watanabe), who acts as a father figure to Joshua's New Asian wife Maya (Gemma Chan). "When the war started, [the robots] protected me," Maya says in the film — and indeed, since many of the AI were originally designed for childcare, New Asia is now full of blended families, made up of robots and displaced, or orphaned, humans.

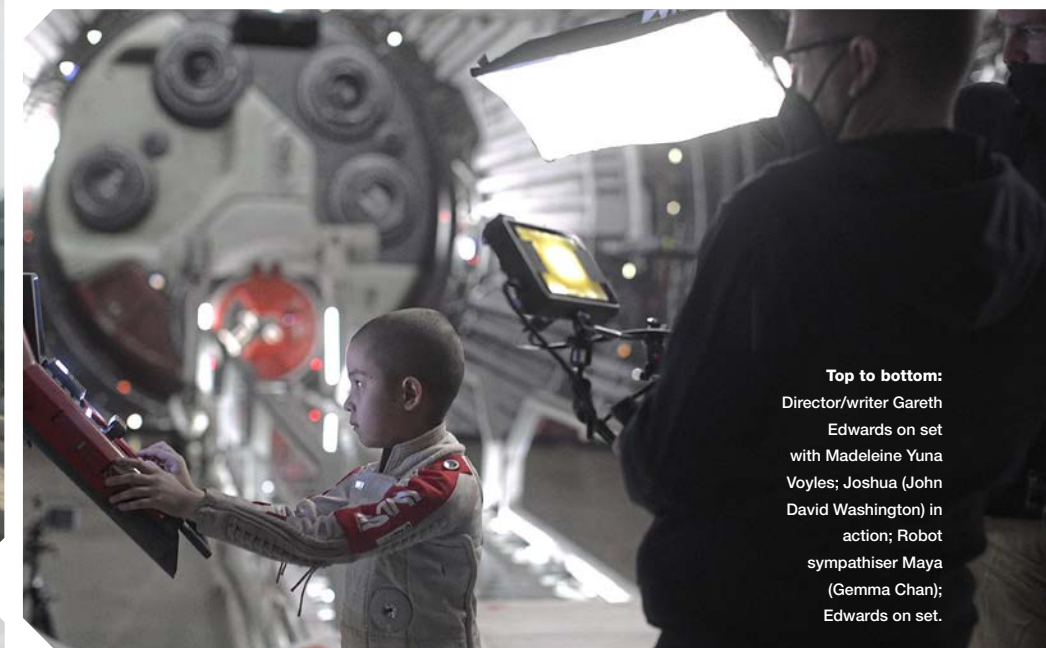
There's a spiritual side to *The Creator's* robots, too. "In that first test footage, where we turned the monk into a robot, it got me thinking, 'Why would a robot be a monk? What do they believe in?'" says Edwards. "Concepts that used to exist purely in the realm of religion are now



Top to bottom: AI cops — but all played by fully clothed humans; A sequence shot at Sapan Mon Bridge, Thailand; Early robot-head art.

overlapping with science: reincarnation, life after death, being conscious beyond your physical body. The idea of AI having these spiritual thoughts is a big part of why I wanted to do the film. The Creator is the robots' 'God' — and the same person the Americans are trying to kill."

Speaking of which: humans up in arms over rapidly advancing AI technology... Does this scenario sound at all familiar?



Top to bottom: Director/writer Gareth Edwards on set with Madeleine Yuna Voyles; Joshua (John David Washington) in action; Robot sympathiser Maya (Gemma Chan); Edwards on set.

THE TECH

When I started writing *The Creator*, the idea of AI potentially surpassing the human race felt very far-off," Edwards laughs. "Now, the joke is that I've set this movie in 2070, when it could have been set in 2023."

Yes, as eerie coincidence would have it, Edwards is launching his new film about a world panicking over the rise of AI into... a world panicking over the rise of AI. "Some of the first things we shot in Thailand were crowds protesting artificial intelligence," he recalls. "It felt absurd at the time — 'No-one would ever do this.' And now I drive past the [Hollywood movie] studios every day to see people doing exactly that."

Clearly, we are some way off from the super-developed, Los-Angeles-nuking AI seen in *The Creator*. But Edwards — a man with such respect for robots that he admits saying "Please" and "Thank you" to Siri — remains cautiously optimistic about the technology's future. "There are artists I know who are concerned [AI] might hurt their jobs, but they're also embracing it as a tool — like Photoshop or spellcheck," he says. "If it could do the laborious jobs for you — that would be great. On the other hand, of course, there are worries about where it's going with trust and people's likenesses."

This latter concern, in particular, is sized up in *The Creator*, which features billboards advertising a tech operation called 'Donate Your Likeness'. "It's like giving blood or sperm," Edwards explains. "Something students might do to fund them through college. You get scanned and another version of you is printed — which becomes a 'simulant'."

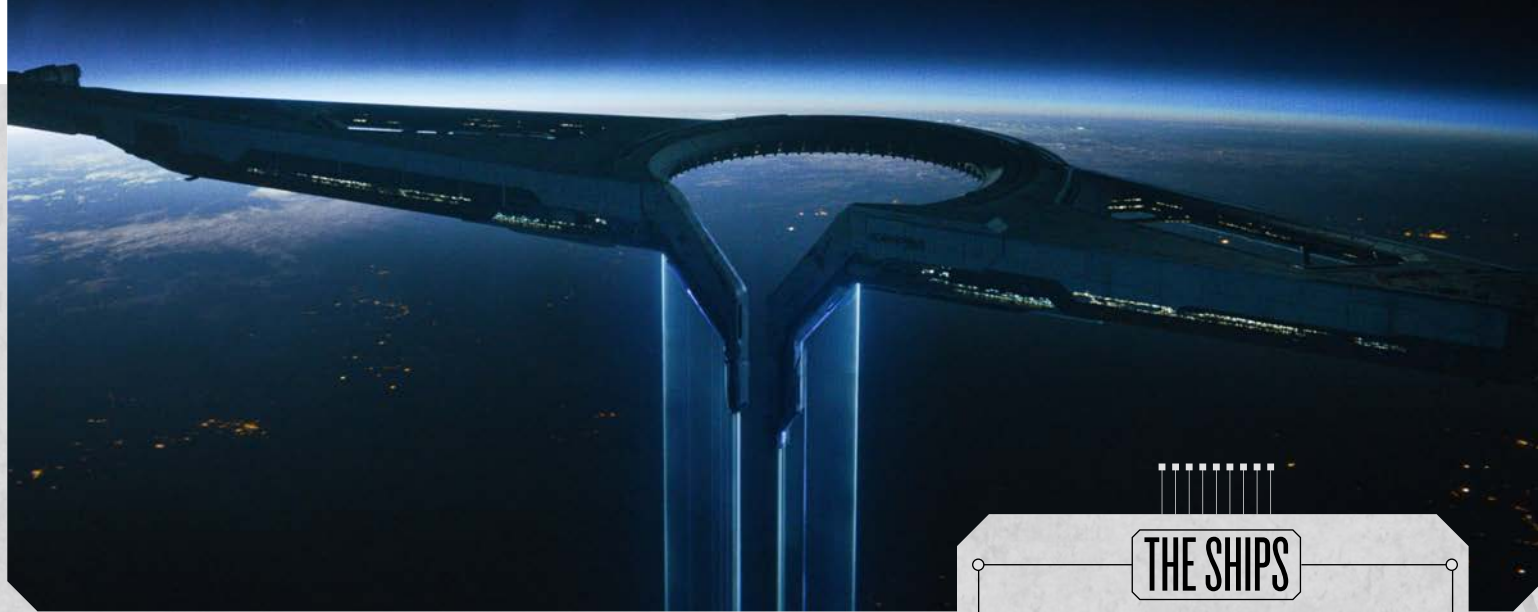
Such is the West's distrust of AI in the film that robotic labs have had to go underground. "We wanted to use this particle accelerator in Thailand as the location for an AI lab," Edwards recalls. "They said, 'What do you want to film?' We said, 'We want soldiers to run around with guns and things to explode.' They were like,



"Yeah, this is a multi-million-dollar facility, so... no." Luckily, the director had a trump card up his sleeve. "Someone said, 'The guy making this movie also directed *Rogue One*,'" he grins. "Since everyone who works in a particle accelerator is also a sci-fi geek, they instantly let us in. On one condition: that they could be in the scene, too." Look out for that particular sequence, then, as every background actor will be a nuclear physicist.



Top to bottom: Tomorrow, today; A sequence shot in the Himalayas; ILM added sci-fi architecture (designed by James Clyne).



THE SHIPS

While some of *The Creator's* tech may seem less futuristic today than a few years ago, it's safe to say that the movie's impossibly cool airships are still very much the stuff of fantasy.

Most prominent among them is 'Nomad', a vast, bird-shaped complex that hangs ominously in orbit above the Earth. "The name is based on NORAD, the American air-defence system," Edwards explains. "But this ship can go around the whole world. America is using it to try and wipe out AI across the globe." For its design, the director returned to his tried-and-tested world-building technique of something-having-sex-with-something-else. "Nomad is probably the result of an eagle having sex with some fangs," says Edwards. "It's this Eye Of Sauron-like presence, watching everyone at all times."

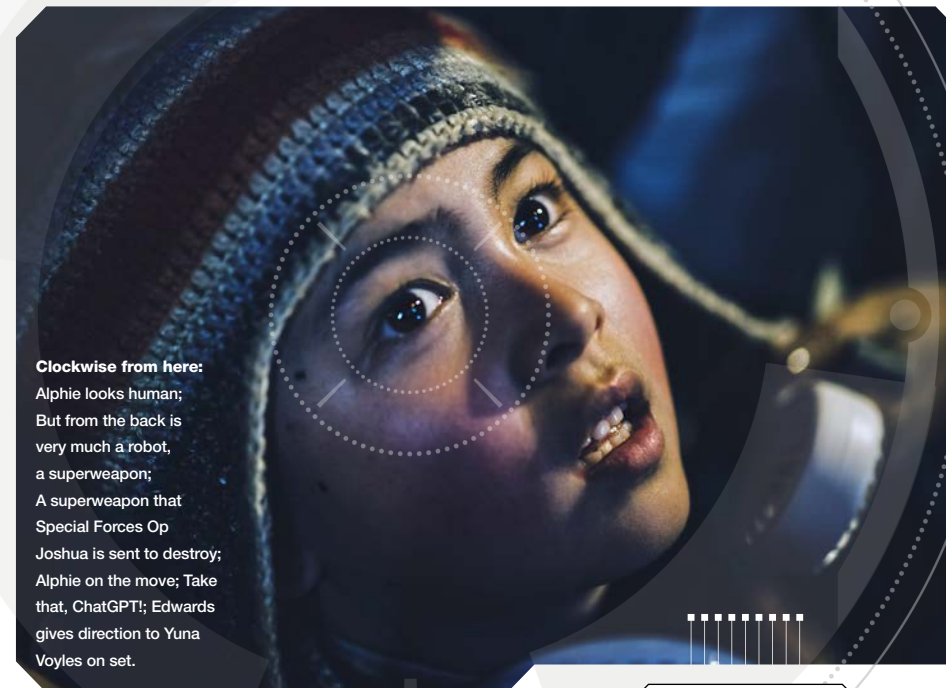
Coming a close second in the impossibly-cool-vessel stakes are the movie's hulking 'Jetcopters' (Edwards: "What if a Black Hawk had sex with a jet?") These beautiful-but-deadly beasts are used by the US Special Forces in their bombardment of New Asia. "We wanted to take big swings, and be experimental with shapes," says the director of the movie's vehicle designs. "Crossing a jet with a helicopter — there are various versions of what that could look like. But a lot of it is cutting things back — creating negative space."

While certain designs, such as Nomad, were pored over for months by the art team ("We benefited from the pandemic by having so much time on our hands," notes Edwards), others were more sporadically decided on. In post-production, ships and buildings were dropped into landscapes, or odd background scenes added without context.

"There are lots of things in this movie that aren't explained or might not make any sense," the director says. "Because that's the thing with world-building — if I really went to the year 2070, shot some footage and came back to 2023, there would be so many things I didn't understand. People would ask, 'What's that ship there?' or, 'What's that robot doing?' and I'd say, 'No idea, I was just filming.'" Edwards cites a scene in *Blade Runner*, in which an ostrich wanders randomly through the street. "But you don't question it," he laughs. "In a weird way it makes something feel more real if there are all these things that just aren't explained." In *The Creator*, much as in the real world, not everything makes sense.



Top to bottom: A shot filmed during a Vietnam location-scout in 2019. ILM later made the boat more 'sci-fi'; Thailand. Altered in post, real vehicles acted as placeholders; Back at Mon Bridge — thanks to a small crew, tourists none the wiser; US Army tank concept art.



Clockwise from here: Alfie looks human; But from the back is very much a robot, a superweapon; A superweapon that Special Forces Op Joshua is sent to destroy; Alfie on the move; Take that, ChatGPT!; Edwards gives direction to Yuna Voyles on set.



THE WEAPON

Despite its time-honoured sci-fi themes of artificial intelligence and nuclear war, at its heart *The Creator* is, Edwards says, "a reluctant father film."

Joshua's central mission, to capture a 'superweapon' which turns out to be a super-cute child, may sound similar to the shenanigans of a certain Beskar-armoured *Star Wars* badass. But a series much older than *The Mandalorian* inspired the plotline. "I've always loved the *Lone Wolf And Cub* films," says Edwards, of the 1970s Japanese samurai movies about a wandering assassin and his young son. "I actually tried to put that dynamic in *Monsters* — the first draft was about a soldier taking an orphan home to his extended family. I got steered in a different direction on that one, but it always stuck with me. I thought, 'When I find the right film, I'm going to put that in.'"

The Creator was the right film. Still reeling from the mysterious disappearance of Maya a few years back, Joshua is charged with shepherding this kid-shaped superweapon

(code named Alpha Omega) to its death. "What's unique about the child is that it's the first AI that isn't just a freeze-frame of someone else," Edwards says. "It's been able to grow from... let's call it, 'birth,'" he adds, enigmatically. "But it's eventually going to surpass everyone and become God-like. So America wants to destroy it."

Joshua, though, forms a bond with the child, nicknaming it 'Alfie'. He turns from destroyer to protector: hence the 'reluctant father'. "I'm probably a bit of a reluctant father myself," Edwards smiles. "I've put off being a dad because of work, but I think it taps you on the shoulder at a point. At a certain age you're thinking of boy-meets-girl films. I'm at the age now where I'm thinking about parent-meets-child."

Encompassing both the quintessentially human and the mind-meltingly strange, this is a deep new universe from Edwards. And all from one idle daydream in an Iowa cornfield. ●

THE CREATOR IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 SEPTEMBER

