

Building on a Masterpiece

Director Kenji Kamiyama and scriptwriter Yoshiki Sakurai talk to Penumbria about work on Production I.G.'s new TV series *Stand Alone Complex*, the latest addition to Masamune Shirow's classic cyberpunk story *Ghost in the Shell*

The near future. Completely cybernetic bodies are not only possible, but encountered regularly—albeit some are nonhuman machines, while others are at least nominally human. In fact, some persons' only human parts are their brains, and even those are not wholly human.

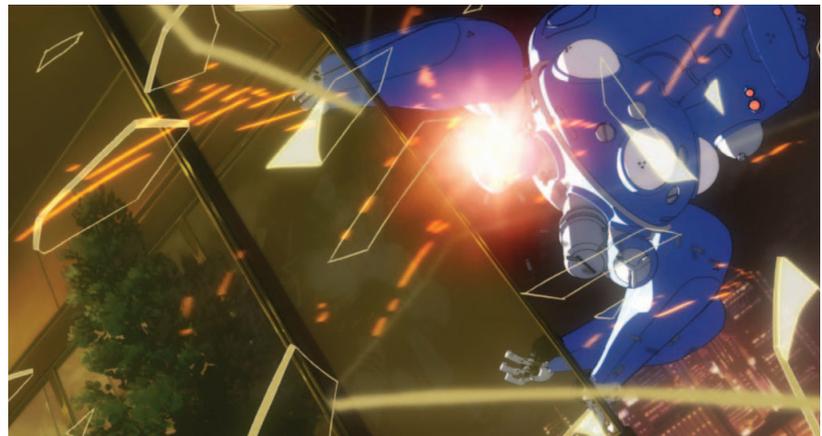
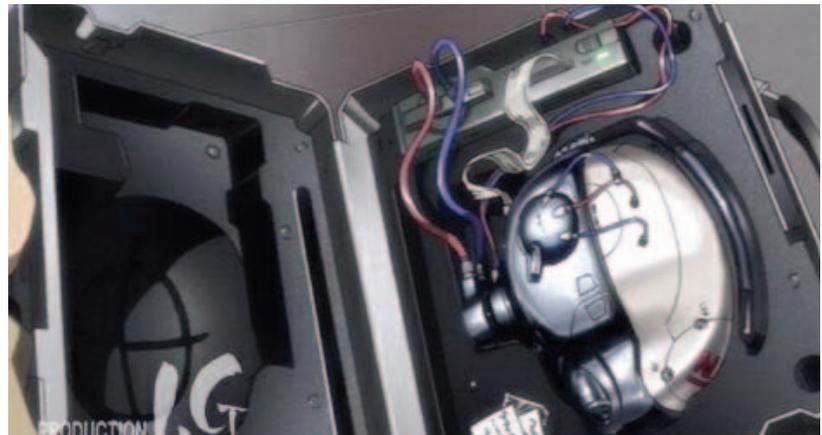
Meet Major Motoko Kusanagi, a special agent for the government. She is one of these almost entirely cybernetic humans, as are most of the members of her team. Her assignment: To expose/arrest/destroy cyborg criminals and “ghost” hackers, and to come back alive afterwards.

But there's more to it than that.

In the *Ghost in the Shell* series by Masamune Shirow, cyberpunk meets cybernautica as people are fully integrated into the electronic environment which surrounds them and permeates their daily lives. Are you a slow typer? Try having fingers that split into fifty smaller and more mobile digits. Having trouble

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PICTURED: Images from Production I.G.'s *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*. Click for larger image.



What's this "anime" & "manga" we keep talking about?

We reckon there are very few of you out there who haven't heard of anime by now, although some may not know it by that name. Anime (pronounced "ahh-nee-may") is Japanese animation, typically films, television series, or video releases covering the entire spectrum of genres and aimed at all age groups—releases in the US include *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *Bubblegum Crisis Tokyo 2040*, *Serial Experiments: Lain* (DVD/VHS only, as far as we know), *Sailor Moon*, *Dragonball*, and, yes, *Pokemon*. US television networks, however, have been reluctant to show anything animated that isn't "for kids," continuing a tradition of putting animation in the nursery that has plagued US TV and film since at least the 1950s or 1960s.

Similarly, manga ("mahn-ga") is best but imperfectly translated as Japanese comic books—but these again run the gamut of subjects and audiences. This is as opposed to the classic idea of US comic books, which are typically filled to overflowing with well-muscled (and, we presume, well-oiled) superheroes in skin-tight spandex suits. (We admit a certain growth in the development of US comics, especially in the 1980s and again now, as compared to animated films, but the US product still has nowhere near the breadth and depth of the Japanese industry.)

But, as they used to say on *Reading Rainbow*, don't take our word for it ... Here are comments on anime and manga by two people very involved in bringing anime to the US, although with differing perspectives. The first, Roger Morse, is the co-owner of Gimme Anime (www.gimmeanime.com), a retail store selling anime, manga, and other Japanese things to the public; the second is Rebecca Norman, director of the Denver anime convention Nan Desu

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with your computer? Jack into it directly via a port in your neck and give it a piece of your mind.

But this is not a 1950s happy consumer view of the future. Vast corporate and governmental entities conspire to take over both cyberspace and the world, and the place of cybernautic "persons" in society, and whether they should be treated as fully human, is a central issue of the original manga and anime versions of *Ghost in the Shell* (GitS). In fact, it is one of the most philosophically intriguing works I have ever seen, while still including a frenetic action movie pace that would wear Mel Gibson out.

GitS (the anime) was one of the most successful anime films ever released in the US, comparing well to such classics as *Akira*—in fact, GitS has become a classic in its own right, doing what it could to disprove the old American notion that anything animated has to be for kids. Grossing highly worldwide and spawning everything from toys to t-shirts to web sites to philosophical debates at universities, GitS is at least as important as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in shaping our discourses on the future.

Now, seven years after the US release of the anime and coinciding with the American release of Shirow's sequel to GitS (*ManMachine Interface*), the Japanese com-

PICTURED: *Stand Alone Complex* director Kenji Kamiyama. Unfortunately, no image of scriptwriter Yoshiki Sakurai was available



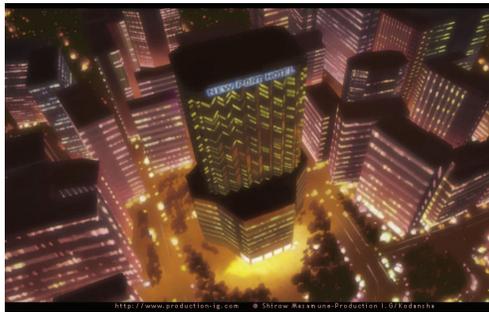
pany Production I.G., in collaboration with Shirow, has developed a 26-episode television series called *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*. It is an ambitious project, and from what little we've seen, it looks to be very high quality, full of both action and introspection, and a great addition to the GitS milieu. We were honored by being granted an interview with director Kenji Kamiyama and scriptwriter Yoshiki Sakurai, via email from Japan, just before the show's first episode was due to be shown in Japan in October.

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex appears to be higher quality animation than most of the anime seen on television in the





PICTURED: (left) Tachikoma; (top) Major Motoko Kusanagi; (below) the bustling city of the future as seen in *Stand Alone Complex*



U.S. Is it unusually high quality for Japanese TV as well?

Kenji Kamiyama (KK): I hope it would be considered so. The amount of the budget was twice the amount of ordinary anime and the time for its preparation was about eight times as much (usually 3 months; we took 2 years).

The visual style appears to be somewhere between that of the Ghost in the Shell manga and the film. Is this on purpose? What design sense were you going for?

KK: We didn't intentionally take the middle way. We wanted to make Kusanagi look more human-like in this series, so that may be the reason for your impression.

How much computer 3D work is there in Stand Alone Complex (and how much was done in more traditional ways)? Is this average for anime on TV?

KK: Most cars, helicopters, planes, tanks and other large mechanicals were created in 3D. Some masked troops and mob people were made in 3D also. Characters were mainly done in traditional 2D hand drawing. This might be the usual way that is used in Japanese anime. I should say about a third of each episode is made in 3D.

In the original manga and film stories, Kusanagi is searching for her humanity, and for meaning in her life. Is the TV show also philosophically-oriented? In what way?

KK: Kusanagi herself might not be as philosophical compared to the film but we do propose some social issues. Tachikoma might be a little philosophical instead. (*Note: Tachikoma are an updated version of Fuchikoma, which in the manga serve as both robotic battlesuits and as stand-alone units capable of independent action.*)

Does the TV show begin where the first manga left off (that is, in the TV show has Kusanagi joined with the Puppetmaster), or is it in an alternate timeline?

KK: It takes place in an alternate timeline, or otherwise we would not have Kusanagi in the series. It is an alternative story that diverges from the eighth episode in the manga.

What is it like to write a script for a 26-episode TV series? Does it take multiple scriptwriters? Do you work together to cre-

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What is Ghost in the Shell?

The original manga version of *Ghost in the Shell* (GitS) by Masamune Shirow was serialized in *Young Magazine* in Japan in 1989-90 before coming out as a collected graphic novel, first in Japan and then in the US (where it was sold as separate issues and then collected as well). In it,



Major Motoko Kusanagi leads a somewhat eclectic and independent team on secret missions against various high-level villains, including evil cyborgs heading vast corporations and “ghost hackers”—that is, hackers who invade people’s minds and wipe out or otherwise mess with their very souls.

The overall thrust of the stories contained in the manga is at least as philosophically oriented as it is action-filled. Among the questions posed by Shirow are: What will it be like to live in a world with cybernetic “people”? What is “life”—can a mostly cybernetic/mechanical being be alive? How much of a person has to be organic to be considered human? What is the soul, and can a cybernetic organism have one? What is the next evolutionary step for humanity?



The anime version of GitS (1995) focuses on one storyline from the manga, that of the Puppetmaster, an entity existing in the 'Net who is not only ghost hacking, but is also involved in some very nefarious government dealings. Motoko and her crew

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Recommended Anime

Psfm's recommendations:

Ghost in the Shell. One of the best cyberpunk stories we've ever seen. Combines action and philosophy in ways the rest of the cyberpunk movement only dreamt of.

Serial Experiments: Lain. By far the most philosophically challenging and strangest (but in a good way) explorations of cyberspace and its relationship to the so-called "real" world.

Cowboy Bebop. Excellent storytelling and an incredible score are only part of this one's attraction.

Sailor Moon (first season, Japanese version). Yeah, we know, it ain't cyberpunk, but again the storytelling and the message behind this one make it a favorite.

Perfect Blue. Very disturbing, but equally well done. The tag line, about this being the product if Hitchcock and Disney made a film together, is almost right. Disney would never go here.

Akira. A classic, a must-see.

Jin-Roh. This one pulls no punches: It's a violent look at a violent alternative history, yet still the human story under it all is the most important thing.

Other's recommendations:

Roger Morse, co-owner, Gimme Anime:

Cowboy Bebop, *Vision of Escaflowne*, *Trigun*, *Macross Plus*. If you want comedy, *Ranma 1/2*. It depends on a person's preferences.

Rebecca Norman, director, Nan Desu Kan:

Cowboy Bebop for fans of sf space action cowboy bounty hunter comedies with a touch of the tragic about them and a rockin' jazzy soundtrack. *Vampire Princess Miyu*, for those who like a shivery edge to their elegance. *Vision of Escaflowne* for the fantasy fans on a large scale. *Ranma 1/2* for beginners, a great introduction to Rumiko Takahashi's popular works. Any Miyazaki movie for anyone who

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ate the overall storyline, and then work individually on episodes?

Yoshiki Sakurai (YS): Yes, that's right. The director, the producer, and all scriptwriters gathered once a week for the script meeting to decide the overall storyline and to check the individual episodes written by each writer (and comment or add to or revise them). We took a trip to Production I.G.'s villa in the countryside several times last summer to concentrate on the story, where we spent many nights talking and talking about how the story should be.

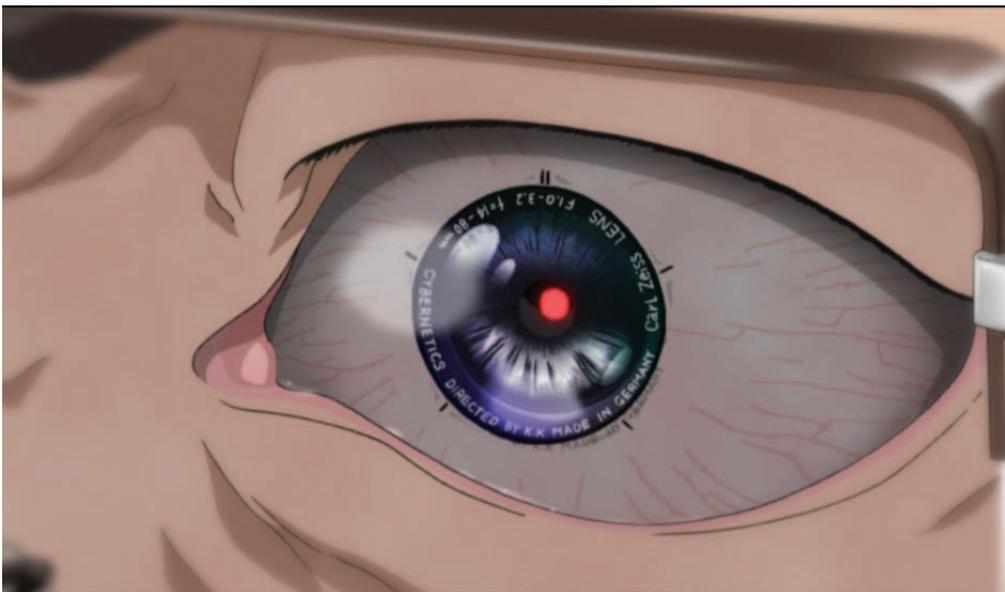
Did you have to do a lot of research for this series? Was it fun to work on, and a good experience?

KK: Yes, very much! It was of course fun,

but really tough at the same time. Especially, we knew that the world will be showing attention and expect a lot from this title. But we certainly had a good experience and to some extent we think that we were able to show something really original.

I've read your monthly column on the Production I.G. web site. What kind of future do you predict? Do you envision a future with cyberbrains and cybernetic bodies?

YS: To some extent, the future with cyberbrains and cyborg technology is not mere SF anymore. For example, NTT is testing an implantable phone gadget that you can implant inside the back of your ear and when the phone rings, one of your fingers trembles and you press that finger against this gadget to talk, etc. Also, pacemakers that you implant inside your heart are somewhat close



PICTURED: A very close close-up of a cybernetic eye, which could be enhanced to see further, see into the infrared, or even be fitted with a zoom function



PICTURED: (above) Chief of Section 9 Aramaki; (above right) could that be Bateau? Probably just a side character; (right) Major Motoko Kusanagi once more

to cyborg technology. There would probably be more organic/inorganic machineries inside our physical body in the near future, I think.

Would you say that science fiction is a good medium for teaching/discussing philosophy? Would you say science fiction is or could be a “mythology of the future”?

YS: SF is no doubt a popular medium, and probably an easy entrance for discussing the so-called philosophy. “Science Fiction” might grow and be called just “Science” in the future, and at that point we can all imagine that it would gain enough support to be called a mythology, as science is the only worldwide prevailing myth at the moment.

What is your next project? What else is Production I.G. working on at the moment?

KK: We cannot tell you now what we are working on, but we can assure you that they are all interesting and exciting. As for the next project, there are some decided ones and



undecided ones, but we shall have a report on them in the near future.

As rumored on the very active Production I.G. forums, the American/English release of *GitS: Stand Alone Complex* is due for December 2002 on Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim. This would be one of the fastest migrations of anime from Japan to US TV screens ever done—in fact, the series will still be running on Japanese TV when it begins in the US, a first (as far as we know) for anime on television. *Ghost in the Shell* continues to break new ground.

Comments? Click the following:

• [Comments](#)

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are much more integrated into their government unit (called Section 9), going so far as to indicate that the government owns their cybernetic bodies—giving them a certain incentive not to quit, as they would have to give the bodies back, leaving, as Kusanagi says, not more than a few brain cells to call their own. The anime asks the same philosophical questions as the manga, is well-scripted (but we do suggest you watch it in the original Japanese, with subtitles), and includes a haunting score by Kenji Kawai.

GitS: Stand Alone Complex is yet to be seen in the US (and, at the time of this writing, has only just started in Japan), but from the trailer, images on Production I.G.’s web site, and information from their forums, we can tell you the production values look very high, the story is more episodic (like the manga), and the music is bound to be excellent (seeing as it is being done by Yoko Kanno, who did the score to *Cowboy Bebop*, currently airing on Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim in the US). It takes place in an alternate timeline diverging from episode eight of the manga, and thus doesn’t follow the Puppetmaster storyline at all.

Additional Note: The sequel to the *GitS* manga, also by Shirow, is called *ManMachine Interface* (MMI) and takes place after the Puppetmaster story in the manga. MMI is currently out in Japan as a collected graphic novel and is (or was, by the time you read this) due out starting in



October in the US, coming out as individual issues put out by Dark Horse and translated by Studio Proteus, both of whom were involved in bringing the first manga to the US.

Kan, at which lovers of anime gather once a year to meet industry professionals and share their favorite stories.

How is anime different from the American concept of cartoons, and how is manga different from American comic books?

Roger Morse: What we think of as cartoons is generally for children; anime treats animation as a medium to tell stories, whether they're for adults or kids or teenagers, men, women, whatever. It goes the wide spectrum. Other than that, it's pretty much the same techniques. It's pretty much the same difference [between manga and comics]. Comic books, for the most part, they're mostly just for superheroes, although they're getting away from that. It is still looked on as a children's, or at least a teenager's, medium. Over in Japan, they have different comic books to target different audiences, and some of those stories end up being animated. There are comics for boys, girls ... some that are targeted at housewives, some that are targeted at professionals, sometimes just your general *salaryman* ... it goes all over the place. You'd find about as wide of a range of manga in Japan as you would walking into your average magazine store, seeing different targeted publications.

Rebecca Norman: The biggest differences are in scale and scope—scale in that anime frequently dives into stories with huge story arcs of dozens or even hundreds of episodes, within which they may have many sub-stories. There can be casts of dozens of primary characters interacting with each other. In scope it differs since many more mature themes are treated than in cartoons. Not necessarily mature as in “adult movies” the way that term is used in the US, but in the sense that the themes can deal with tremendously difficult universal emotional struggles, with how you react when your divorced parents marry someone else, what you do when your family dies in front of you, what you do when another kid at school

makes it their life goal to look innocent and terribly tortured by you so that everyone's got it out for you. Manga and anime both have these qualities—and they tend to treat them in a more serious way. While superhero comics here in the States subject their heroes to all sorts of torture, very few of them do more than having the hero react with “Well, I must pull myself up by my bootstraps, and this offense shall energize me to become the person who must save the world!” Meanwhile, over in the anime frame, a little cyborg girl is looking out at a blue sky floating lazily by as she runs a coffee shop no one ever visits, and thinking about why her creator put her in a coffee house three hundred miles from nowhere, and she thinks she might go outside and enjoy the rain. And three episodes later we see a parcel delivered from her creator, and it's a tiny silver coffee grinder, and she thinks about how this thing is a created machine just as she is, and the wind blows softly through the rushes. Manga and anime can be obvious, garish, and gaudy as any cartoon—they also have the freedom to be as thoughtful as a poem or a Dostoevsky novel.

In fan circles, there is a “Sub vs. Dub” debate. What is that?

Roger Morse: One of the things that has been known to really irk some of the hardcore fans is the fact that the English voice acting seems half-done, it seems like they're not putting the effort into it ... It just doesn't hold up to what the Japanese do. The Japanese, when they record their stuff, it's almost like an old radio drama. You have everybody in the studio, they can interact with each other, they can work off of each other. Even the professional animation here in America, generally the actors do not see each other when they're recording. It depends on the studio, but for the most part, there may be one or two of the actors recording at the same time, but that's about it. There was somebody talking about *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*. The two main characters were recorded on separate coasts. It takes a great actor to pull that kind of thing off

when there's no one else to interact with. So, if you've got somebody who's not quite a professional voice actor, it's just going to sound flat. The other thing is, some people do not want to read subtitles, they feel it takes away from actually watching the animation ... so it's a mediocre dubbing job, but they don't have to keep looking at the subtitles, looking at the animation, looking at the subtitles ... Generally American audiences do not like subtitles at all. If nothing else, [I know this from] the reaction that I heard when watching *Brotherhood of the Wolf* and *Iron Monkey*, when they came into general release. The second the subtitles hit the screen, the crowd groaned.

But some people feel [it comes down to] whether it's that the Japanese voice actors do a better job and are closer to the original vision of the character, or whether you want to go for accessibility. It's a toss-up.

Any other comments about anime/manga you feel should be recorded for posterity?

Rebecca Norman: I've always loved stories, and that's why I love anime and manga—there are thousands of new stories here to discover, whether they're live, painted, or drawn. There's another world to step into.

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loves grand animation and music with a love of nature and many touches upon the most traditional Japanese culture. After that it gets difficult because there are a lot of others that I love for different reasons and that would be good for different people depending on their personalities. I also really enjoy the art style and comedy of *Trigun*, the goofiness of *Slayers*, the beauty of *Vampire Hunter D*, the girl's baseball team story of *Princess 9*, and so forth.

What anime do you enjoy? Let us know on our [discussion boards!](#)