

Death in Portland

by Bob Davis

Gus Van Sant's new film, *Paranoid Park*, is a first-person account of a teen skater, Alex (Gabe Nevins), who accidentally kills someone and grapples with whether to tell anyone. Shot on location in and around Portland, Oregon, the film is the first American venture by cinematography team Christopher Doyle, HKSC and Rain Kathy Li.

Doyle, who first worked with Van Sant on *Psycho* (1998), has been collaborating with Li for three years. (Most recently, she shot a film in Poland that he wrote and directed. [CHRIS: Do you want us to mention the title?]) "It started with a phone call," she recalls. "Chris was considering collaborating with someone and wanted to know whether I'd be interested in shooting a 14-minute installation piece for [fashion designer] Dries Van Noten. (RAIN or CHRIS: How did Chris become aware of your work in the first place?) We developed a visual idea, and I prepped and shot it. After watching the footage, Chris said he would work with me for the rest of his life!"

Van Sant gleaned a 30-page script for *Paranoid Park* from Blake Nelson's novel of the same name, and he encouraged his actors, most of who were nonprofessionals, to improvise. "For me, that was familiar territory," says Doyle, who shot several pictures for famously improvisational filmmaker Wong Kar-wai. "It wasn't quite Wong Kar-wai, but it was loose enough that we could find the film as opposed to referencing others' work or making a skater genre film."

A longtime resident of Hong Kong, Doyle approached making a film about an American teen philosophically: "How does one dare speak for another culture? What is the balance between deference and respect? How does one make images that are 'of them' and not just 'for us?' The answer was to try to step back as much as possible, to impose as little as possible aesthetically and even technically on the film."

The first step was an intimate mini-shoot at Van Sant's house on the Oregon coast. There, Nevins, Li, Doyle and a few other crewmembers shot Alex's diary materials and a few scenes in which Doyle appears as Alex's uncle, Tommy. "That set an informal tone,"

recalls Doyle. “We just tried to ‘learn’ the kids and create the space we wanted them to find. We lit very little and just happened to have a camera around. We just put the camera on the ground and shot whatever; the actors would come in and out of the frame ... or not.” The cinematographers tried to resist the temptation to look through the viewfinder. “That seemed a reasonable compromise!” laughs Doyle. “Ultimately, we drifted towards a space some might call ‘anti-aesthetic’ and others might call ‘Zen.’”

“With Gus, the attitude is, ‘Shoot what we see and don’t change a thing,’” he continues, adding that he adjusted a table or two on the sly. “For me, it was a matter of watching to find the space to engage. Technically, it had to be as simple as possible. We mostly used available light, and we exposed and processed the stock [Fuji Eterna 400T] in a consistent way [pulled 1 stop]. I like to think the film made itself.”

The film’s “Zen” aesthetic is punctuated by long traveling shots. In one instance, the camera traces Alex’s POV as he hikes through the tall grass to an oceanside bench; in another, it follows him through a shopping mall and then leads him up an escalator in a single take. “It’s about exploring along with the character,” says Li. The cinematographers employed a Steadicam for many such shots, but they also sometimes mounted their Moviecam Compact (and the Cooke S4 32mm lens on which they shot most of the picture) on what they call the “Steady Chang.” Doyle explains, “Chang is the name of the best Thai beer, and it translates into ‘elephant.’ An elliptical metaphor!” Li describes the gear as a Cinesaddle tied tightly around the chest so the operator can rest his elbows on it. **[Do you mean the actual Cinesaddle, or did you create something similar? They advertise with us, and it doesn’t look like a body-mountable thing in the photos...]** “With it, your whole body supports the camera’s weight,” she notes. “It’s great for women cinematographers and for improvised scenes; it’s steady but allows the flexibility to move with the actors and hold the shot as long as the performance lasts.”

Key grip Bruce Lawson rigged another apparatus to accommodate one of Doyle’s “mad ideas”: the camera’s slow creep down a long classroom table as a police detective interviews Alex about the accident. For the shot, the Moviecam was attached via bungee cords to a U-frame that straddled the table. “I was able to ever so slowly push right down the center of the table for the full

two minutes of the interrogation, ending at the policeman's POV of the by-now-concerned boy," says Doyle.

When Alex leaves the interview, he starts down the school's hallway, picking up speed as he closes in on the slowly back-pedaling Steadicam. As Nevins accelerated, Li and Doyle ramped the frame rate to 70-100 fps without adjusting the aperture; as a result, the boy's progress looks slow and he becomes increasingly underexposed. "We wanted to show what having experienced the interview caused in Alex's head," says Doyle. "We initially overexposed the background a few stops to help silhouette him when the frame rate increased. The school corridors gave us just under T2 at 800 ASA at 24 fps, so it was a matter of making something of what we had."

Doyle and Li framed for Van Sant's favored 1.33:1 aspect ratio but protected for standard 1.85:1. "1.33:1 was liberating, but we protected for 1.85 because we feared our integrity would be violated [by exhibitors]. We chose 1.33 out of respect for the Super 8 format of most skater films; as a move away from 'how films look' to, we hope, 'how this feels'; and because we wanted to push ourselves to *look*."

Paranoid Park's Zen aesthetic is probably most evident in its lighting. Li, a Beijing native and alum of Bournemouth Arts Institute, started working as an electrician on commercials eight years ago. "With Chris, I learned to simply enhance the feeling that the space creates naturally," she says. "We simply balanced the natural light and the film light. If I tried to set up more than three lights for a scene, Chris would start shouting at me!" Most interiors were lit by a single 18K HMI through a window, shaped by cutters and the occasional gel.

To light the rail yard where the accident occurs, the cinematographers set up two construction-light rigs, "the kind used to light the guys who dig up your neighborhood at night," says Doyle. "They have a retractable tower with four very powerful lamps that can be turned in any direction. We put them in the shot, and they did all the lighting. Our gaffer bought 10 of them on Ebay for the same price as the day rental of the 18K!"

For a series of shots in which Alex drives aimlessly through a Portland downpour after the accident, the filmmakers simply jump-cut from one configuration to another instead of trying to maintain lighting continuity. "Our only light was a car kit Mini-Flo set by the

dashboard,” says Li. “The camera was rigged to the hood of the car, which was pulled by a truck.” The shots are all desaturated, with a hint of green in the shadow. “Portland’s street lamps are sodium-vapor, so whether it’s the stock or the timing, whatever the light doesn’t hit gives the complimentary green,” notes Doyle.

The crew was reduced to four when the time came to film Alex showering away the vestiges of the accident. “It was Gus on mic, Rain on camera, Gabe in the shower, and me with an open-faced 2K, worrying about whether the water was going to electrocute me — all in a 10-by-4 bathroom,” recalls Doyle. “That’s how to make a film!”

To pick out individual droplets of water in the shower, Li closed the camera’s shutter to 45 or 90 degrees. She panned across the spray and then with Nevins as he slid slowly down the wall. “We ramped the speed again without compensating the stop, so you can sense subtle changes in the light,” she says. “I couldn’t pull focus, operate and manipulate the speed all at once, so we called in our first assistant, Chris Blauvelt. I think he was controlling the timing of the speed change in the middle of the take.”

Doyle seems to relish “the break from self” that his collaboration with Van Sant afforded. “I think it was the same for Gus, too,” he remarks. “You break from self to find the essential, and that’s why Rain and I shot the film rather than [Van Sant’s frequent collaborator] Harris Savides [ASC]. Harris obviously would have done a better job! I feel Gus made the brave — most would say foolish — choice to dare to move on. One has to walk away from habit and comfort to know where one really lives.”