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Short Takes

A Motel-Room Meltdown



Who's Watching Me?
by Jay Holben

Paranoid is an eight-minute excursion into the mind of a paranoid-schizophrenic woman on the verge of a total breakdown. The short film was adapted from Stephen King's 100-line poem "Paranoid: A Chant," which appears in *Skeleton Crew*, a collection of his short stories.

I served as both director and cinematographer on the film, and my primary goal was to create a visceral visual experience that would plunge the viewer into the chaotic and disturbed first-person voice of King's poem. *Paranoid* was primarily photographed in the span of a single day.

One of my first choices was to shoot in the 2.35:1 widescreen format. Because this project was always intended to have a digital finish, and because I didn't have access to anamorphic lenses or a Super 35 camera, I shot the film in Academy 1.33:1 and composed within the Academy frame for a 2.35:1 image. I knew the CinemaScope frame was particularly well-suited to a narrative such as this; a large portion of the storytelling comes from isolating the woman deep in a corner of a hotel room, and the expanse of the room fills the rest of the frame. I felt that 'Scope was the best choice for the story, even though it

forced me to a tape finish and pretty much eliminated the possibility of ever striking a print.

My second decision was to combine color and black-and-white imagery to differentiate between reality and the woman's delusions. King's writing is ripe with incredible imagery of "faceless men" with "eyes like silver dollars," and I wanted a canvas that would suit those images and bring them to life. All of the reality in the film is depicted in color, and all of the fantasies and delusions are depicted in black-and-white. To further control the palette, I kept the color sequences fairly monochromatic, working with a "dirty" palette to intensify the woman's destitute situation.

Although the film intercuts black-

and-white and color, it was shot entirely on Eastman Kodak EXR 500T 5298 emulsion. Using one stock gave me greater flexibility later on with some inserts that were on the borderline of being real or delusion, and it also helped to cut down on the budget. The black-and-white sequences were desaturated in telecine at Riot Santa Monica by colorist Beau Leon.

My main objective with the lighting was to keep it simple yet graphic, tailoring the imagery to serve the story. For all of the black-and-white sequences, I pushed the contrast ratio to play best in graytones. For all of the lighting situations, gaffer Michael Collins and I used as few instruments as possible to avoid complicated setups.

The main location, the woman's

Paranoid, an eight-minute film based on Stephen King's poem "Paranoid: A Chant," captures the mental anguish of a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Below: Director and cinematographer Jay Holben is assisted by Christopher Probst.

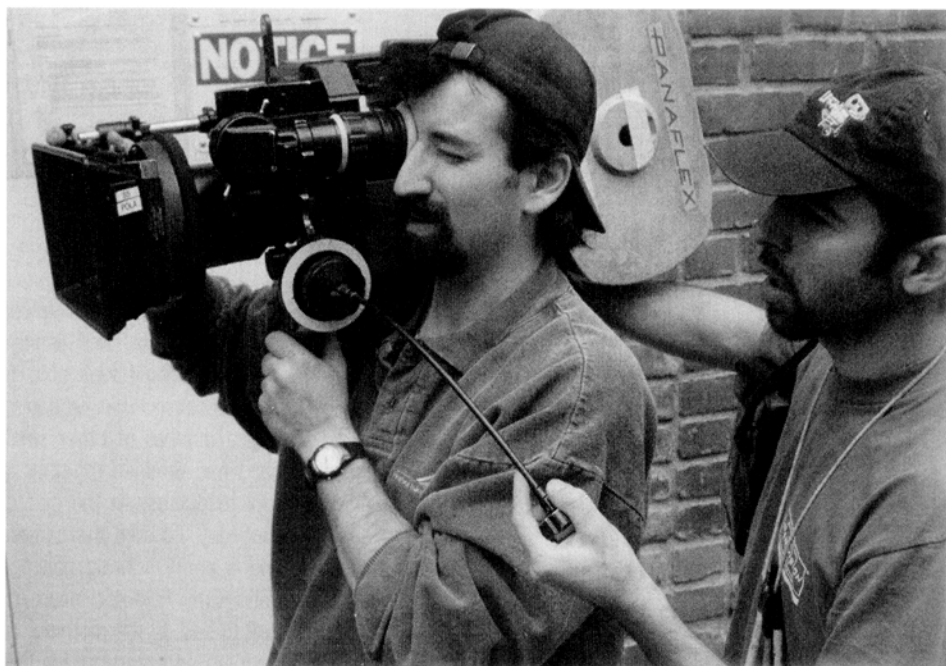


Photo by Otto Kisinger, images courtesy of Lumatic Fringe Productions.



Holben shot the short film in the 1.33:1 aspect ratio and composed within the Academy frame for a 2.35:1 image. "King's writing is ripe with incredible imagery, and I wanted a canvas that would suit those images," he says. Principal photography was accomplished in a single day.

hotel room, was lit with three fixtures. I used a 1K Baby fitted with Lee Super White Flame (#232) gel and bounced into the ceiling to give me an overall, source-less room tone (the ambient level of light at the base of the exposure, which sat at 2-2 1/2 stops under key just to lend texture and color to the shadow areas). The Super White Flame gel is actually intended to take white flame arc sources to 3200°K, and it has a wonderful, deep amber color. Pushing a tungsten source through the filter creates an effect that is very similar to sodium-vapor lamps; this idea was inspired by a June 1995 *AC* article on *The X-Files*. Working from the overall ambient level, I was able to create a warm but dirty light that isn't very pleasing on flesh tones, which is what I wanted. The wallpaper on the set was carefully chosen to work well with that source color to suggest a very dilapidated look.

To light the woman in the corner, I had a straight sidelight raking down the wall, usually from a 150-watt Pepper gelled with the same Super White Flame. For one or two of the wider shots, I hid a Mini Kino Flo on the side of the lamp next to her to get the same side-light feel. Outside of the window, I had a 2K Baby Junior coming through Rosco Medium Red (#27) on a Variac, and our best boy sat out there all day long, rolling the dimmer up and down to simulate a flashing neon sign. I also put two Tweenies on a single stand outside of the window; they were panned to emulate car headlights passing by, adding another layer of texture to the lighting.

The insert work was all done over the course of three nights prior to principal photography, and I kept those setups very simple as well. In fact, I had no crew at all for those shoots. I was able to make *Paranoid* because I was producing and shooting a number of other small projects that I had grouped together in order to pool resources. At the end of each shooting day, I'd take the camera package and a small lighting package home and shoot my *Paranoid* insert list before I went to bed. In the morning, I'd pack the gear up and take off for that

day's job, and then repeat the whole process that night. Although it was a bit lonely working alone, I also found a kind of purity in each of the setups. Although I certainly don't want to work like that again, I enjoyed the experience.

The most important thing for me was to stay true to King's words. I spent a great deal of time studying the cadence of his text and carefully structured the whole film around his patterns of words. Where he broke paragraphs, I took visual breaks. Where he broke lines or deliberately formatted his text in a certain way, I strove to interpret that choice visually. It was imperative that his words be the driving force behind the film.

On the occasions when I've been both director and cinematographer, I've preferred to work with a camera operator in order to free my concentration from the viewfinder. However, I served as my own operator on *Paranoid*. Because the set was so small and compact, I didn't feel any lack of connection with my lead actress (Tonya Ivey), and I was very comfortable directing from the eyepiece. For me, however, working that way is a rare exception — I'm not a believer in the auteur theory. Filmmaking is a collaborative art that requires every position to really make the magic happen; we just happened to have gotten lucky and made magic with a very small crew.