The Reel Show — THE INTERNATIONAL TV CHANNEL FOR FILM AND TV PRODUCTION

Undiscovered country

Robin Charters talks to the principals involved in creating stereoscopic film noir thriller pic Dark Country about the creation of the movie's look

The dark country road look.

The night look.

Actor/director Thomas Jane sits across the table from me on the warm stone verandah of the Hyatt Regency. The first day's shoot for 3D thriller *Dark Country* has just wrapped successfully, and Thomas takes a sip of his club soda and sucks on a huge cigar. Sitting among the stunning mountain vistas nestling Albuquerque, New Mexico, we have just witnessed the hills around us turn vermilion in the fading sun, but now the fire-lit verandah takes on a more subtle, orange glow.

Sitting on my left is the movie's director of photography Geoff Boyle. He reaches into my bag and pulls out a Litepanels LED. Attaching a matching warm-up filter and diff, he hides the light on the table and aims it at the right side of Thomas's face, subtly sculpting his features and enhancing the sparkle in his eyes. I lean over to Geoff and whisper, "I love it when you light my Making Ofs." But later he suggests the shot could have been brighter. And I thought we were shooting film noir…

I adjust my Z1 to the level of Thomas's eyeline and check Denise's roaming camera is speeding and the sound level is OK. Rather than having to carry kit from the UK to New Mexico, we have been kindly loaned a Sony Z1 and two Sennheiser lav mics by Abel CineTech and a further Z1 by BandPro. Denise gives me the all-clear and I ask the star of The Punisher and recent horror flick The Mist how it feels to direct his first feature.

"Nerve wracking," smiles Thomas. "There was this wonderful period of time when the film first got green lit that I went home and had a panic attack. I called up my friend Frank Darabont and said, 'Frank, how do you do this? They want me to make the film.' But then you start casting, location scouting, crewing up, and that feeling passes and you start to get this wonderful sense of confidence. And then comes the night before the shoot, when you don't sleep at all." He laughs, "you ask yourself, 'what have I done? How do I get out of it?'"

He switches his cigar to his left hand. "I called Mel Gibson," he confesses. "I said, 'I'm terrified.' He said, 'don't worry. I was too – and I still am. The feeling doesn't go away.' He said when he directed his first film, he called Clint Eastwood, and Clint Eastwood, in that great Clint Eastwood voice, said, 'you already know. You know stuff you don't even know you know. Relax.' And that felt really good. Kinda hit the nail on the head."

Thomas could have picked a more conventional shoot for his debut feature. Instead, proclaiming full confidence in his crew, he has elected not only to shoot 3D, but 3D using experimental cameras and moves, including a 3D Red One camera rig and two Silicon Imaging SI Mini rigs– and the SIs will, for most of the time, be housed for ultimate maneuverability in the MK-V-AR Steadicam, operated by AR designer Howard Smith. The SI rigs are brand new, but the Red rig brings some history with it. It has been modified, but in essence it's the same rig that shot *Terminator 2* in 3D. All the rigs were put together in a sleep-deprivatingly short space of time by ParadiseFX in Van Nuys.

"How many firsts are there in the movie?" muses Geoff Boyle, overseeing the setting up of the first night shoot, a car chase along an arroyo. "Well, it's the first time Silicon Imaging cameras have ever been used in a variable interocular stereo rig; it's the first time the Reds have been used in a stereo rig; it's probably the first time two Reds have gone phut! at the same time; it's the first time you've had 3D on a Steadicam – I think; it's certainly the first time you've had 3D in an MK-V-AR rotating rig.

"And it's only the second day."

Dark Country is a film noir road movie with a hint of the supernatural. "My old buddy Tab Murphy came up with the script," recalls Thomas. "Actually, it was a short story he'd written. We thought it would make a fantastic film, so we worked on it for a couple of months with another director who was going to do it, and we made a little deal, but then that fell apart. A couple of years went by, then I got a first look deal with Lions Gate, who paid Tab to write the script – and immediately rejected it. So I sent it over to Patrick Aiello at Hyde Park, who fell in love with it, and I also sent it to Sony, and Scott Shooman fell in love with it, and the two of them got together and figured it out, and here we

are."

It's now approaching midnight at the arroyo, and the mountain temperature has dropped below freezing. Producer Patrick Aiello politely asks the night shoot ambulance crew to cut their motor for a few minutes while he fills us in with more of the background to the movie. "Initially Dark Country came to me as a 2D movie," he says. "Quite frankly, the script was at such a high level of execution that, for our company, it was a picture that was more or less ready to go. Thomas being attached as the star was definitely the deciding factor, and that was why we put forth all our energy to push the picture with Sony.

"With a major studio, the smaller the budget, the more important it is to bring the picture in on budget. Although the actors have a very strong demographic, the picture is limited fund wise because Sony isn't certain at this point where the picture will fit into its crowded slate."

Casting

"Casting is difficult because the money is not as much as we would normally be able to offer talent," continues Patrick. "However, the flip side is that, when there's so much passion behind a project, actors want to be a part of it. We only got Ron Perlman at the last minute. Scheduling was very difficult, but he and Thomas have a strong relationship – they just did *Mutant Chronicles* together."

Playing opposite Thomas is Lauren German. "I was made aware of her by Scott Shooman at Sony," says Patrick. "He was very insistent that we see her previous work, so we went to Sony and screened *Hostel 2*. She stood out like a shining star, so we knew right then that she would be our lead. Sony is very supportive of her.

"This is a very ambitious picture," he continues, "in the sense that we have limited time to get our shots and the shots are heavily choreographed. We have multiple very high-end digital 3D cameras, so we really have to be diligent with the shots we go after. Really, it's a style of guerrilla filmmaking on this budget, with very high level technicians and talent. The biggest hurdle is to get your shots and know when to move on."

The look

Graphic artist Tim Bradstreet is production designer on the shoot. "I went over this project with Tom about a year ago and immediately fell in love with what it's about," he says; "the whole *Twilight Zone*, *Outer Limits* storyline. But even more important from a design aspect was Tom's idea to take this 3D. The film is really married to film noir – it's kind of an updated film noir. I know a lot of filmmakers claim that's what they're doing too, but they often miss what film noir is, photographically. That's where I came in, because my work is mainly in comics and illustration, and has a very black and white chiaroscuro look. So I incorporated that into the ideas that were coming out of Tom's head. It's just been a gas: it's a road picture, so lots of cars, lots of roads, lots of dynamic shapes and silhouettes in a desert; beautiful stuff.

"It's very much a present day story, but we want you to be a little displaced; your rooted in reality, but because of the cars and the locations and some of the set dressing, we have a very bizarre mixture of retro stuff – like if you ever drove down Route 66 before they turned it into 'Historic Route 66' and built all those new façades. There are so many great old motels, with old metal neon signs, and that's very much the flavor we're going for. The cars reflect that too.

"Putting my head together with Thomas, we came up with a very comic book style, in terms of creating depth and using a lot of black. Yes, there's color, but at the root of it it's black and white. Then we mixed that with all our favorite film noir movies and how the old cameramen of yesteryear used to build their shots. They weren't afraid to have things in the foreground that were all black. We looked at films that have been done in the past 20 years and we could count on one hand the films that claimed to be inspired by film noir and actually were."

"It's pure film noir," agrees Thomas. "I'm a film noir fanatic, and this film very much suits the film noir style. We've all seen a lot of movies, so we know the pacing of original film noir was very different from today: the lighting structure and the speed of the film was very different. So we have something to build on, but now we have our digital cameras and our faster films and our AR rigs; but the attitude and the gutsy style of crushing the blacks and taking chances, dutching the camera, and being inspired by Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick and a bunch of wonderful guys like that – it leads you to find a certain style that makes you feel good.

"I'm tired of watching shots that are overlit and boring. I'm a huge fan of John Alton, who wrote the book on film noir photography: *Painting With Light*. I'm so surprised that people lost the plot at some point; there was this pinnacle of filmmaking in the late 40s and early 50s that was a wonderful combination of stage and film. Of course, film evolved from stage, but when we learnt to move the camera and learnt what cinema could do – and we learnt what a close-up was, what a tracking shot was, and what a wide shot was, then suddenly we hit it."

"3D with a heavy, high contrast style is something we haven't seen before, and so this is very much an experiment," adds Tim. "Having people such as 3D expert Ray Zone on board, I think we can marry these two styles together and come up with something really dynamic; something that will play great in 2D as well as in 3D – a very interocularly awesome experience."

Tim is standing in a gas station that has been dressed to look like the outside of the diner featured in the first morning's shoot. "The story came first, and we all sprangboard off that," he says. Behind him, Thomas is writing Just Married on the back of the metallic blue prop car. "Essentially, it's always been about two characters and then three characters in a car, lost in some sort of a dreamscape. The challenge is to try and keep that interesting when you're in a car for three-quarters of a movie.

"We really wanted to do something a little different in terms of lighting, because we're using shadows heavily. We wanted to introduce color keys to the male and female leads, lighting Lauren all in amber from the radio dial. Normally, you'd have a green radio dial, but we like amber much better, and I think that works really well. So she's lit in a soft warm color; Thomas is lit in aquamarine coming from the dashboard light. So compositionally and colorwise, it offers a lot of interesting shots."

He gestures around him at the furious activity to get the shot set up in time for magic hour. "At the moment we're gearing up to shoot daylight, but a lot of what we're doing is day for night, so we'll just grade or underexpose the shots, and we can tint in certain colors because we have so much control over each frame. We only have three hard locations, so it's not like designing a prison sequence from Shawshank Redemption, where there's quite a bit of drawing and production design that goes into creating those sets. We're doing a lot of retro fits to existing locations – the gas station, the diner. We want to create interesting compositions in the frame too, and treat them as building blocks. Once you get the cinematographer and the cameraman in, they can take what's there and just run with it – they can shoot what we have in the storyboards, which is already pretty awesome – or they can feel free to riff off what we've started."

Director of photography Geoff's one for riffing. He has been heavily involved in devising the technical look of the film with Thomas, translating the looks that he and Tim came up with into specific LUTs for the cameras. "Those looks come from in here," says Geoff, tapping his temple. We are back on the edge of the arroyo, but it is magic hour, and the crew around us are busy assembling the crane for the night shoot. Not far away, Howard Smith, operating the Red 3D rig, has just experienced his double Red crash, but as yet Geoff is blissfully ignorant of this. "We went round and shot all the recces on my Canon 350D digital stills camera," he explains, "and I then applied looks to those. The main look we just talked through – Thomas wanted black and white, but not quite black and white; he wanted some color in it and skin tones, so we got one we agreed, which is actually the Night Look we're about to use now.

"Later, Thomas says, 'the opening will look really nice with this warm golden glow.' Hmm, but Thomas we're doing it in black and white. 'Well not the opening we're not.' OK. So, I do another grade. But it's cool, it's the right way to open it: it's a very golden sunset, but as you go further and further into the Dark Country it gets less and less colorful and more and more bleak. And then, after their first incident, where we meet a certain character, it goes very black and white. But with skin tones. And it will be the look we decided upon originally.

"All these looks are recorded in the metadata," he explains, "but they're not actually applied to the picture, so you can always go back to nothing if you want. What I'll do, day by day – or weekend by weekend probably – is just trim them; I've got a calibrated system in my hotel room and I'll trim the pictures to look more and more like the finished film. Hopefully, when they come to the edit, 90 per cent or – as this film is pretty low budget, meaning we have to work very fast – possibly 95 per cent of the finished film will have already been done in my bedroom, colorwise." There is a snort from Tim Bradstreet as he saunters past. "Well what else have I got to do in my bedroom, Tim?" laughs Geoff.

Steve Parker

Steve Parker is editor of the Reel Show. His degree course in linguistics and ergonomics was completely wasted on him. He stood for election for the position of President of the Students Union (and won) so that he could spend a year organizing parties and drinking cheap alcohol. He became a journalist while at university and has been a slacker ever since.