

# Filming on **The Death Strip**

Film stock  
KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 and KODAK VISION 250D 5246

Camera and lenses  
ARRIFLEX and Moviecam cameras fitted with Zeiss lenses



*The Death Strip* centers on an 11-year-old boy, who along with his family, is forced to escape across what was known as 'The Death Strip' in East Berlin. Ten years later, he reluctantly returns to the unified Germany, forcing him to confront his past and the truth behind his mother's disappearance. Nicole Haeusser wrote the story and directed the film.

"I grew up reading about failed escapes, and also had extended family living in the East whom I had never met" says Haeusser. "I wanted to tell a story that focuses on the life and death choices people were forced to make, and depict the culture that forced those decisions."

Haeusser was impressed with Darren Genet's images in *The Monster and the Peanut*, and approached him about shooting *The Death Strip*. The two immediately connected on their ideas for the film. "Darren and I had a quick understanding of the overall photographic approach, and style of shooting, composition, as well as color choices," says Haeusser. "The film plays in two time periods that we wanted to clearly differentiate."

For the scenes depicting East

Berlin in 1980, Haeusser and Genet created a look that was much darker with deep blacks and high contrast. They eliminated white as much as possible and assigned red tones to the younger boy. They shot many of these scenes handheld.

"We wanted the look to express the bleakness of the characters and the oppression they faced," says Haeusser. "We chose to shoot in Super 35 format because the widescreen aspect ratio enabled us to restrict the sky from the frame in the 1980 sequences. We composed images as much as possible with action in the foreground. Film also adds a layer to the images that I didn't want to miss in a period piece."

For the 1990 sequences, they used a smoother camera style with many moving shots. The sky is also revealed, and colors are more vibrant with less contrast. The frame-in-frame concept was dropped for this time period.

They filmed *The Death Strip* in both Berlin and Los Angeles. Genet used ARRIFLEX and Moviecam cameras fitted with Zeiss lenses and loaded with 35mm film.

"We chose Kodak stocks for their reliability and performance

under most conditions," says Genet. "We shot (KODAK VISION2 500T) 5218 film for the stage and night work, and (KODAK VISION 250D) 5246 film for day exteriors. I'm very comfortable with 5218 because it sees the world as my eye does. I am always impressed with its ability to read into the shadows and still maintain the highlights. I like to use a pretty wide range of contrast and need a film stock to hang in there with me."

In Berlin, they shot scenes both on location and on the Studio Babelsberg lot. The escape sequence was shot on the longest remaining piece of the former East German border strip. The border guards' uniforms and trucks were all supplied by locals and were authentic to the time period.

"The original lights on the strip were turned on for the first time since the fall of the wall," says Haeusser. "The cold in Berlin and on the border strip was difficult to work in. It was the coldest winter in Berlin in 20 years, and it was a night shot with kids. On another day, it started snowing in the middle of the scene. We had to wait it out and finish the scene a little differently than originally planned."

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When shooting moved to Los Angeles, Haeusser and Genet had the challenge of making it look like wintry Berlin. "We shot scenes at the Los Angeles Zoo using grass and trees because we knew we could change the color scheme in the D.I. suite at Technicolor. It matched great with all the material we shot in Berlin."

*The Death Strip* has been shown at festivals worldwide. The film has earned numerous accolades including Best Drama at the 2008 College Television Awards presented by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Foundation.